Godling Ascending

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Summary

Response to DZ2's 'Harry, the Twice-Blessed Half-blood' challenge. Fem!Harry. Herakles Potter knew she was odd. Exactly how odd turned out to be far odder than she originally thought.

Notes

Hello, all! This is another one of the stories I've already posted on FF.net. You might have already read it there. If not, welcome! I intend on making some tweaks, add to the story in some minor places, and clean up my typos, so if you want to read the better version you're better off sticking around here. c:

DISCLAIMER: This will apply for any future chapters I might add as well. If you recognize it, it's not mine. If you don't recognize it, it's probably still not mine. Any writing of mine will be a patchwork of things I think are cool and ideas from other people sewn together by the threads of my personal writing style.
Herakles Potter knew she was odd ("Freakish chit!"). It was the way she seemed to have been born already comprehending the world around her ("Stop looking at me with your damned demon eyes!"), remembering things she should have been too young to remember ("Your useless parents died in a car-crash!" — "They were killed. Mum died in front of my crib."). It was the way her aunt and uncle looked at her suspiciously when unlucky things happened even though she had never been the naughty sort ("What do you have to say for yourself?!" — "Why would I even want to do that?!). It was the calm she felt in the face of things she saw other children crying about ("Excuse me, officer, I'm lost." — "When did you last see them?" — "About nine o' clock." — "That's six hours ago!"). It was the way her aunt and uncle refused to use her proper name at all — she hadn't known her name was actually Herakles and not Heri as she had always been called until she had seen Aunt Petunia write it down on her school application form.

"Why do you only ever call me Heri then?" Heri had asked then, violating the rule about not asking questions.

Aunt Petunia's usual sour expression when dealing with Heri became more pinched.

"It's a ridiculous name!" the blonde woman snapped. "What sort of decent person is named Herakles of all things? It belongs on a side-show fortune-teller! And haven't we told you that there will be no impertinence such as asking questions in this house?"

No asking questions: that was the mandate that Heri was to live by if she wanted to retain her ability to remain within the Dursley household. Not that she was really keen about sticking around, but there were little other options for a little girl outside of living on the streets until she was killed, or taking up with a paedophile. As Heri was not eager to die or be perved on, she did what she could to not get kicked out.

She couldn't help being odd though, it seemed to be some innate part of her. Even still, it was fine enough; with her oddity came a warmth that overcame her whenever she was down, a sense of otherness that made her feel as if she wasn't really alone in the world.

Discounting the mess with her parents' death, the first time something tried to kill her was when Heri was four years old. Aunt Petunia had let her play in the garden that day, happy to have Heri out of the house while she watched childrens' shows on the telly with Dudley. Heri took advantage of the rare opportunity to play without Dudley fouling things up for her and she poked about the backyard to her heart's content.

She was tending to the weeds around the poppies when she heard the rasping of something moving on the dirt. Soft hissing came from the direction of the mint.

§Scent . . . plump fleesshh . . . Ssssooo hungry . . .§

Heri scooted back from where she had knelt and scanned the plant-life warily. She had never heard such a voice before.

§Where, where? Musst bite . . . strike . . . kill . . .§

Heri was nothing if not a child that knew danger when it was coming; working through the ebbs
and flows of her aunt an uncle's tempers had taught her well. At the word 'bite' she had tensed, ready to bolt as whatever it was spoke of killing. Anyone else might had run off immediately but Heri knew that any sudden movement, forward or back, would provoke a violent response.

§There.§

Quicker than a blink, something shot out of the poppies, flinging itself at her face. Heri snatched the creature out of the air with a firm grip under its head, plucking another one up as it tried to catch her off guard. She clenched her fists tightly, giving them a sharp shake at the things writhed in her grip.

In her hands were the oddest of snakes she never thought she'd see. Heri was quite certain that her relatives would deny their existence if they had heard of the creatures. They were the size of regular garden snakes but they were of a blue colour she had never seen on any kind of animal, and had wings the size and coloration of a pigeon's growing out of their backs. They shimmied pointlessly against her grip, wings fluttering in protest. They hissed in displeasure, spitting out threats and insults.

§What sort of snake are you that has wings and can talk.§ asked Heri, peering at them curiously.

§Morsel speaks! Clever food . . .§

§Bite! Bite! Musst eat.§

Heri shuddered at the thought of being eaten. She shook the one that was squirming the most once again, dazing it. She lifted the one that called her clever closer.

§Of course I speak. I'm a person. It's you that's strange for talking.§

§Meaty mouthful . . . false words. This one . . . without speech of humans . . . the prey hisses . . . the way of serpents.§

Heri wasn't sure how to take such a claim.

§It doesn't matter either way.§ Heri decided. §I'm going to let you go and you two will leave.§

Snakes with wings were brilliant in theory, but they weren't much fun in reality.

She moved to put the dazed one back on the ground, but as soon as her grip loosened it thrashed violently, baring its fangs at her. Heri caught it by its tail instinctively and whipped its head into the ground. Her foot came up and stomped down on its body with a gruesome CRUNCH.

Where once was a winged snake there was now a flattened carcass. Blood leaked from its mouth and gooey entrails discharged out from where the pressure of her foot had ruptured it.

Heri took in the sight of the creature she had killed with detached interest. She had never killed anything before, not even the spiders in her cupboard. She turned back to the remaining snake now quivering in her fist. She tightened her grip again, almost choking the animal.

§Are you going to go without any trouble.§ She asked it.§Or am I going to have to take care of you too.§

The remaining odd snake agreed to leave peacefully and never bother her again.
Heri decided she had enough of being outside for one day and returned to the house shortly after. She didn't notice the snake she had killed disintegrating into golden dust nor the eyes that had watched.

If one were to ask someone to describe Heri Potter, they would receive different answers depending on the people they were asking. To Vernon and Petunia Dursley, she was a heathen child that was always up to no good; when she wasn't fouling up her chores she was running wild. To the residents of Privet Drive, she was like a changeling from the fairytales: odd, unpredictable, and they were certain there was something off about her even though they didn't have any concrete proof — there had to be something about her, why else would she be so frowned on? But to ask a stranger not yet polluted by the shady rumours about her, Heri was a remarkable, intimidating child.

It was not something one could put their finger on, not one trait that stood out to explain why Heri stood out in a crowd. She was intelligent, yes, but in a crafty way more than highly educated; there was a shrewdness about her. She was confident, yes, but it was a quiet self-assurance instead of the bright-eyed arrogance that was common to her age. There was no doubt she was beautiful, but it wasn't in the eye-catching way people exclaimed about. She had a face that was pleasing to look at that seemed to grow more appealing the more you looked at it; a comfortable sort of lovely.

She could sing, but it was nothing outstanding. She did well in art, but nothing inspiring. She could do sports, play instruments, take care of plants, and get along with animals, but no more than any other person that knew what they were doing. The only thing that was rather out of place was her quick temper and how fast she could run.

Of course, all that was ignoring the strange things that happened around her. Heri was as lost as anyone else when it came to instances where reality decided to go on holiday. She didn't know why that snooty substitute teacher's wig turned blue nor why she had been blamed for it despite the fact that she had been on the other side of the room when it happened. She couldn't explain the lights that shortened out, the cracked mirrors, the irregular speed her hair grew, nor the shaking furniture. If anyone had asked her, Heri would have pinned everything except her hair challenge on Dudley; wanton destruction was his hobby, not hers.

If one were to describe Heri Potter, they would be most accurate in saying that she was a curious girl that was good at many things but great at very little. Whether this was because she was that way naturally or because her family discouraged her in every way is unknown.

The first time an odd occurrence could safely be pinned on Heri was a few days before Dudley and she started primary school. It would be the first time they were away from the house without Aunt Petunia with them since Aunt Petunia was a fussy sort and didn't trust the teachers of the nursery school.

Heri was assisting her aunt in the folding of the laundry while Dudley vegged out in front of the telly. It was slow going because Aunt Petunia was very particular about how the creases sat and arranging the piles by styles and colours. Heri had just finished a stack to Aunt Petunia's exacting standards when calamity struck.

Dudley heaved himself up and bellowed for his mother.

"Mum! I want a snack!"

The sudden loudness just as the two females had slipped into a calm that tuned out the noise of
the telly made both of them jolt. In Aunt Petunia's case, she simply sprang to attention to fetch her son something to eat. In Heri's case, she startled badly enough that her stack of folded clothes went tumbling to the floor.

"Oh, you clumsy girl!" Aunt Petunia scolded. "Pick those up right now and start over. I'll not have clothes strewn across this house!"

Heri hastened into action, snatching up the fallen clothing at once. She kept her eyes on the floor as her aunt bustled off to the kitchen. The sound of the refrigerator door opening was heard.

Arms filled with loose shirts, Heri glared in the direction Dudley sat. It was just like the noisy layabout to mess up her chores. This was the fifth time this week that he startled her into dropping what she was carrying!

Heri shoved the shirts back on the table and scowled at them. Then she frowned in concernation — one of Uncle Vernon's shirt had a hole in it. There was a split in the seam of where the sleeve met the shoulder. She reached out and pinched it together while trying to decide what to do. Should she hide the shirt? Oh, she was going to get blamed for it either way!

As Heri worked herself into a mini-panic, she felt the hole she was pinching grow smaller. She pulled her hand back immediately in alarm. Then she gaped. There, where a split seam had just been was a perfectly stitched sleeve. It looked as good as new and showed no signs of pulling apart.

Heri rubbed her eyes and looked again. The shirt was still in pristine condition. What in the world was . . . ? Had she just . . . ?

"Stop standing there like a lump and get back to folding!" Aunt Petunia snapped. She had a sandwich on a plate in her hands and was walking toward Dudley.

Heri immediately jumped back into folding, her hands moving automatically. She did her best to appear unbothered though her aunt wouldn't likely care either way. Even as she finished up with Uncle Vernon's button front and moved onto one of Dudley's Sunday shirt's, her mind stayed with the split seam that undid itself. Maybe her relatives were onto something when they blamed her for the oddest things.

Heri spent the next several weeks after that incident trying to fix the tears in Dudley's old clothes. When she finally managed to repair something on purpose, she decided that being able to do odd things wasn't nearly as bad as her relatives made it out to be.

The first time Heri saw what could only be described as the spirit guarding her was when she was comforting a younger child as he cried his heart out on her lap. It was during her second year of primary school. On that day, reception and first year were sharing recess, and her cousin Dudley was revelling in having children even smaller than those he already terrorised to push around. The teachers were sitting on the other side of the playground and either couldn't see what was happening because of the distance that the play equipment blocking the way or they wrote it off as children just playing rough.

Dudley's victim was sweet-faced boy called Davy, one of the smaller five-year-olds, about as small as Heri had been at that age and that was no recommendation. Dudley and his pals pinned the younger boy down while they were 'playing Tag' and ground dirt in his face, laughing meanly as they did.
"You're IT!" hollered Piers Polkiss, Dudley's right-hand man.

The children that were part of the game shrieked and ran about.

Davy got to his feet unsteadily, tears misting his eyes, and tried his best to tag someone else, but he just wasn't a very fast boy. They all ran from him, calling out taunts and making mocking faces at him. Again and again he tried to grab hold of someone, but they all stayed well out of reach.

Dudley, someone Davy didn't dare try to tag even though the large boy was just as slow as him, soon got tired of waiting for a new person to become It and pushed Davy to the ground once more when Davy came within arms reach.

"You're ruining the game!" Dudley declared, frowning heavily at the boy on the ground. "Piers, you're It again. This loser's too slow to be any good!"

The crowd of children playing Tag immediately forgot all about Davy, not giving him a second glance as Polkiss tagged another of Dudley's bullies, forcing the game back into play.

Heri had been watching from the branches of the tree that she had been chased up into when Dudley's goons once again went about making her miserable. They didn't beat up on her like they did the boys, but they liked to drag her around and pull her hair (at least, they used to before she socked one in the mouth, scaring the bejeebus out of all of them). It was very lucky that she had long discovered that none of the other children could climb as well as she could, making the trees the locations she spent most of the recesses.

She had been keeping a wary eye on the proceedings just in case Dudley got it in his head to try to get one of the other children to pull her out of her tree. It didn't happen often since Heri had proved time and time again that she was slippery as an eel when she wasn't fighting back tooth and nail, but that didn't mean Dudley wasn't stupid enough to forget on occasion. When they had started tearing into Davy, she had watched with the eyes of hawk, ready to run for a teacher the moment they started to really hurt him.

When Dudley declared Davy too slow to be any fun, Heri was relieved. If the younger boy proved to be good entertainment, he would've become a new target, subject to torment whenever he was spotted. Really, it was to his own benefit that Davy bored them. That didn't stop Heri for sympathising with the poor boy as he was left behind though.

She covertly climbed down from her tree and seated herself at the base.

Davy got to his feet, sniffling all the while, and teetered off to the side. It just so happened that he came in Heri's direction. Their eyes met — Heri pensive, Davy wary. He looked like he was ready to bolt in the other direction — Heri was well known as the only person brave enough to stand up to Dudley, therefore scary in her own right — when she smiled hesitantly at him and patted the grass next to her. Melting under the show of understanding, Davy folded himself into the space next to her and clutched at the hem of her oversized shirt.

Davy's eyes were glassy and his bottom lip trembled. Only his pride kept him from crying as he obviously wanted to. She pulled a plaster from the pocket she always had some in and patched him up. They sat in companionable silence even as the boy held himself back.

After a minute, Davy broke the silence, choking out, "H-h-h-he's s-s-s-s-so mmme-eann. . ."

Heri patted that hand clinging to her in a comforting manner. She wavered a moment before
reaching her other arm out toward him.

"Would you . . . would you like a hug?"

Davy didn't hesitate. With little finesse, he threw himself into Heri's arms, wrapping himself around her middle. She eased him into a more comfortable position as he sobbed, smoothing his hair gently as he all but crawled into her lap.

Heri wasn't familiar with hugging or giving/receiving comfort. She would have thought that holding someone as they cried would be terribly awkward for both parties involved. However, it proved to be the opposite. As she held the crying little boy, offering him mute understanding, she felt as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

A shimmer of form out of the corner of her eye caught her attention even as her hands continued their soothing motions and she cooed quietly in reassurance. Heri looked up to see a ghostly figure of a woman watching them with sharp but understanding eyes. Davy didn't notice as he still had his face pressed into her thigh, but the woman nodded cordially at Heri, much like the way an important dignitary would nod to those attending to them, and then vanished even as Heri was still looking at her.

She caught sight of the spirit more often after that, but it was never more than a few seconds accompanied by a sense of approval.

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Heri bent over where she landed and desperately gasped for breath. Her hand shot out to catch herself as her knees buckled, landing with a painful THUNK. Her head spun. She rested her forehead against the ground to relieve the heaviness she felt.

Sounds of shouting and confusion reached her ears after a moment and she lifted her throbbing head once more to survey the area. Confusion filled her. Was she on the roof?

"Where is she?" she heard a boy bellow. "I thought you said she turned in here!"

"I saw her!" another boy cried.

"Obviously not, stupid! She's not here!"

The two going back and forth sounded like the pair of Dudley's goons she had just been running from. Heri crept over the to the edge and peered down. There — looking like the stupid apes they were — were Piers and Malcolm, Dudley's main enforcers. One would have thought that after months of not being about to lay a finger on her they would lay off by now. Obviously she had overestimated them.

She shuffled back from the edge on her rear and took a moment to settle her heart-rate. She had done something odd again. She had ran into a dead end and tried to jump behind a pair of trash cans welded into place in a wooden shelter. Next thing she knew, she was on the roof.

She tried the handle again, this time trying to channel the oddness that got her there in the first place. If her weirdness could fix clothes and let her teleport, it was reasonable to think that it might
unlock a door for her.

Twist, twist, jiggle—*click*.

Heri beamed. It had worked! She opened the door and hurried down the stairs as fast as she could without falling. There was still a few minutes of recess left and she didn't want to get in trouble because the teachers couldn't find her.

As she sprinted back toward the play area outside, Heri couldn't help but wonder what else she could do with her powers.

St. Grogory's Primary School soon became a place of the strangest accidents.

**By the time Heri was in third-year, she was well known among the teachers as an observer.** While the other children vied for attention and couldn't be bothered to see too far beyond their own interests, Heri sat quietly and watched. Unless chosen to answer questions or demonstrate something for class, she only ever watched.

"She's always watching," said Mr. Tisdale, Heri's gym teacher, unease in his tone as he spoke with other teachers during lunch.

While some of the teachers looked at Mr. Tisdale strangely at being unhappy with a child who always paid attention, there were others that agreed with the sentiment.

Heri saw far more than others thought she did. With her quiet, unobtrusive presence, she ended up being privy to many secrets. Far more than they'd ever want her to.

She had sat out in the corridors, looking through a book before classes, and watched as a forth-year student went down the halls, opening lockers and taking things out of them. He wore worn clothing that were as scruffy as hers were and he had a sly look about him. She had seen him do similarly twice before, but he had become extra shifty now that the school administration was cracking down about the thefts.

She had been in the loo and overheard a couple of the older girls talking about boys that they liked. One girl was talking about dumping the boy she was currently 'dating' since she had only been with him out of pity anyway and she had her sights on another boy whose well-off parents gave him lots of pocket-money.

Just before walking into the classroom one day, she had overheard her homeroom teacher talk excitedly on the phone with a friend about trying for a baby with her husband.

"I think we're finally ready," the woman had said. "Adam's stopped drinking so we'll have a stable environment for the baby."

She had been sent during recess to deliver a stack of worksheets to a teacher overseeing detention. Only a few students had detention that hour, not even a handful. Out of the small number there was a sixth-form boy, Terrence Wright, known for his bad attitude belied by a pretty face. She had paused in the open doorway and waited to be acknowledged by the teacher, but he was occupied keeping a keen eye on the delinquents he was supervising. A bit *too* keen of an eye when his sights reached Wright. Heri saw quite clearly the gleam in the man's eyes before he noticed Heri standing there.

Heri did not try to hide that she had seen the way he had looked at Wright. Judging by the tense
way he greeted her and received the worksheets, he knew very well that she was onto him.

There was little that Heri missed when people let themselves become complacent in her presence. Whether they wanted her to or not, she was always watching.

Heri was hiding beside a fruit stand. A lumbering brute was not ten feet away from her, glaring around the area in search of her. She ducked farther down when he turned in her direction and held her breath.

Heri had been dragged out grocery shopping with her aunt and cousin. She had been told to push the cart around as her aunt looked for bargains and Dudley dragged packages upon packages of junk-food back to the cart. Every now and then Aunt Petunia would scold her for slouching or 'looking like a wastrel.' Dudley would make faces at her as he bumped her on his way in search of sugary trash. Heri had been bored out of her mind just before the hairs on the back of her neck rose.

She turned slowly to see what was amping up her danger senses. There, looking ridiculous hold a shopping basket between his forefinger and thumb, was a giant man with one eye. And by giant, she meant giant — his shoulders were level with the top of the shelves. He also had only one eye. As she took in the sight of him and tried to make sense of it, he caught sight of her as well. Knowing better than to stay in place while strange things were happening, Heri booked it around the aisle while her aunt wasn't looking.

An ungodly roar echoed behind her as she ran, and she couldn't help but wonder why no one was at all troubled besides her. Aunt Petunia refused to tell them about the tooth fairy, for God's sake, how was she not bothered by the clearly supernatural happening right in front of her?

Thought was abandoned in lieu of running for her life. Whatever it was was chasing after her, though it was made difficult for him because of the small aisles and his chunky hands. Boxes of cereal and seasoning were knocked off the shelves; jars of were shattered across the floor; preserves and pickled vegetables everywhere; a shelf was dented by the force of the monster running into it.

Heri had flung herself behind a pineapple display and snatched up a box-cutter left behind under the stand. Her heart was going a mile a minute and she was positively vibrating with adrenaline. The safety knife looked incredibly pathetic when compared to what she was up against, but she pushed the blade up as far as it went and held it at the ready.

The monster came barrelling out of the dairy section and had snarled at losing sight of her.

"Come out, little hero," he crooned, falsely sweet. "There's no use in hiding from me."

Heri clenched her eye shut tightly and prayed to whatever powers that be that her weapon would be good enough and that she'd make it out of this alive. So caught up in her praying, she didn't see as the box-cutter gleamed brightly and took on a yellow hue.

"Here you are!"

The creature lunged forward, ripping aside the stand, sending fruit splattering.

Heri shrieked and flung herself to the side, just out of the monster's grasp. Left — right — side — other side — Heri desperately ducked and weaved, turning the beast round and round to stay clear of its hands.
Too soon, he caught her by the back of her shirt and hoisted her into the air, grinning foully.

Not knowing what else to do, Heri jabbed out with her box-cutter, blade going right to the face. The tip pierced the monster through its eye, landing almost directly in its pupil. It dropped her like a hot rock and thrashed about, howling in pain. Heri landed on its great forearm and climbed back up it to twist the knife deeper, paying no mind to the blood, determined to end the thing. It fell to the ground, convulsing.

As the monster languished in the throes of death, Heri thanked the powers that be that she’d live to see another day. She climbed off the thing and almost fell to her knees in exhaustion. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply to calm herself down. Dear God, she had killed someone! He was trying to kill her as well but still!

"Heri!"

Heri's head snapped up at the sound of her name. Her aunt stood at the entrance of the fizzy drinks aisle, frowning.

"Heri, get over here at once!" Aunt Petunia called, gesturing impatiently. "I told you to stay by the cart! What are you doing over there?"

Heri looked at the place where the body of her kill should have been. There was nothing there save a faint shimmer. A quick look around revealed that the room was clear of anything that would indicate any kind of battle had just taken place. She looked at her hands that had just recently been dyed red with blood. They were perfectly clean.

Had it all be just some outrageous dream? Was she going crazy?

Something on the floor caught her attention. There, a few feet off from where the monster had lain, was a pocket watch. Bemused, Heri picked it up, testing the weight of it in her hand. It appeared to be a perfectly ordinary pocket watch until she opened it. Inside, on top of standard time markings, the clock showed days, weeks, months, moon cycles, and planetary movement. She gaped at the sight.

"Heri!" Aunt Petunia called again, impatience growing.

Heri tucked the watch into her pocket and trotted off toward her aunt. She wouldn’t notice until later that the box-cutter followed her home.

St. Gregory’s Primary School was one that specialised in Classical Studies. Every second day, the students would attend art classes, attending music classes in between. This was because the school wanted to promote a sense of refinement on the future generation, and because parents paid more when they felt their children were getting better. Fourth-year and up even took Latin lessons, learning the language of the Romans as well as the mythology. At the end of the year, the three upper years would put on a show for the younger children about Roman culture and the gods.

Because she was known for being smart without being a teacher's pet, not a week into her third year an older student approached Heri about doing his Latin assignments for him. He was a lazy rich sort so he offered to pay her as well. Heri agreed easily enough and earned pocket money on top of getting a head start on the class she’d be taking the year after. The boy told his friends about her, and soon she was doing the homework of three other older students as well, getting £3 for worksheets and £5 for essays — more than enough that at any given time she could buy snacks when she was
hungry and school supplies when needed.

Heri spent most of her afternoon time that didn't involve doing chores reading up on the Olympians at the public library. The Latin teacher used the myths as the basis of her lessons, so the stories they learned the language from were about the Greco-Roman gods shaping the world. Heri learned root words and how they came to be called such as well as marveling at the outrageous feats the heroes accomplished.

Ceres, known to the Greeks as Demeter, was the goddess of agriculture. She was all about growing things and crops. Her name was where 'cereal' came from, cereal being a food product made of grain, a crop. She was also the reason the seasons existed; her daughter went to the underworld every six months to stay with her husband, and the plant-life began to wilt because Ceres missed her daughter quite a bit. Autumn was when Proserpina — or Persephone — left for the underworld; winter was when Ceres was consumed by her depression; spring was when Proserpina returned to her mother; and summer was when Ceres was full of joy.

Heri thought such an explanation was very sweet, but wouldn't it have made more sense if Ceres stopped being so sad after a while when it became obvious Proserpina would always return to her? Of course, that would mean the seasons would be drastically changed again, throwing off the process of food production, so Heri supposed everyone was better off with Ceres continuing in her moping.

Another goddess that Heri found funny was Juventas — Hebe — either a goddess or a personification of youth depending on what book Heri read. Her name was where 'juvenile' came from, and despite being a goddess of a pretty important part of a person's life, she had only been a sort of serving maid for the gods before she tripped and made a fool of herself, thus getting replaced by her father's boyfriend. (The last fact about Juventas' father's boyfriend was not a part of the school-edited reading of course.) One would think that one of the only two daughters that Jupiter and Juno had together would be treated better, but she was pretty much shoved off to the side until Hercules came along and married her.

Heri didn't know how to feel about the fact that the one who could be argued as her current patron goddess was married to her name-sake. She would have been miffed at being named after a boy if it wasn't for the fact that boys were often name after the Greek equivalent of the goddess Diana: Artemis.

Reading up on the Greco-Roman gods became a hobby of Heri's. Outside of being part of what she was learning in school, it was all very fascinating in its own right. She would find herself thinking how the individual gods would react to situations and what she'd do if she had their powers. It was a great distraction from the drudgery that was dealing with her relatives.

She became uneasy when she discovered stories that mentioned giants monsters with only one eye. The story of Odysseus and Polyphemus reminded her a bit of the fiasco at the supermarket. A cyclops ... they had both blinded a cyclops. Of course, in Odysseus' case, he didn't kill it. She had tried to put the memory of running and fighting for her life out of her mind when it was obvious she was the only one that saw any of it, but finding written history — albeit history that was accepted as mythical — talking about the creature and its origins pooled dread in her belly.

No, no! She wasn't going to think about it! Odd things happened around her, yes, but believing that gods and monsters existed was insane. She was going to put such thoughts completely out of her mind and focus on reality!

Still, even as she put the book away and threw herself into translating a parable about Apollo and the sun, Heri's perception of reality stretched to include things many considered impossible.
Heri loomed angrily over a bigger boy curled up on the ground at her feet, groaning in pain. He glared at her and tried to grab at her ankle, but she pulled the limb in question back and aimed a kick at the offending hand. Said hand was retracted with a shout and cradled to the boy’s chest.

Keeping her snarling face pointed in his direction, Heri backed away from him. She wasn't going to let him get the jump on her again.

"I warned ya, O'Toole!" Heri growled. "I told ya that if you touched me again I'd tan yer sorry hide from 'ere to kingdom come! Did ya think I was kiddin'?"

Loosely surrounding the two who had just been fighting were students hanging out on the playground instead of going home immediately. It was after school on a Thursday and this had been the most exciting thing they had witnessed in weeks.

Heri had earned a bit of a reputation after it become blindingly obvious that Dudley couldn't do shit to intimidate her anymore. Hell, he hadn't been able to catch her once since first-year. The dimwits that thought themselves big and bad took her continued freedom from bullying as a challenge. They got it into their thick heads that successfully cowing her would make them the big boss of the school.

Bunch of morons. They were in primary school for God's sake!

Only a few of them had gotten physical with her, the rest weren't cocky enough to actually beat on a girl. They were children after all. Even the few that tried physical intimidation like pushing her around and tugging on her hair had backed off when she socked them good in the gut. O'Toole was a dog-faced imbecile who was the only one that tried fighting with her.

The first time, she had twisted his wrist for trying to grab her and told a teacher on him. Heri had warned him that if he ever did such a thing again, she'd take him out proper. Obviously he thought he was a match for her. Now he was crippled with pain from Heri knocking him off his feet and nailing him in the groin. How pathetic.

"Violent bitch!" O'Toole groaned, scowling weakly at her.

Gasps of scandalised shock followed. These were kids from good families, words filthier than 'stupid' and 'bloody' were mortal sin to them.

Another kicked nailed him, this time in the shoulder.

"I asked if ya thought I was kiddin', not what yer mum shoulda named ya."

"Don't talk about my mum, Potter!"

"Who was talkin' about yer ruddy mum? I was talkin' about you. Or are yer ears as lousy as yer brain?"

"You—!"

Another kick, this time the forearm.

Heri heard titters and chattering. She sent a glare at the gawking crowd.

"Anyone else want some of this?"
The onlookers startled and bumped into one another in their haste to disperse.

From across the street, a figure had stood watching the entire confrontation.

**H**eri couldn't abide liars; she didn't have the patience to deal with divining the truth out of them. In her way of thinking, the world would be a far less complicated place to live if lying didn't exist. That was not to say that she didn't see the use of deception, but *speaking* falsehoods was a wretched habit.

Besides wanting to live in a simpler world, Heri hated liars for the fact that Dudley was the biggest liar she ever had the displeasure of knowing. He spewed lies so often, Heri would stop to double-check if he said the sky was blue. What was even worse was the fact that Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon swallowed down all of Dudley's lies without a thought, believing him for no other reason than that he was their son. Heri thought that that exact same face was reason enough to not believe a word he said.

What's more, Dudley loved to tells lies about Heri. He told the lunch monitor that she stole another child's fairy cake even with the frosting smeared on his cheeks. He told the teachers that she stole his homework to turn in even though the assignment in question was clearly written in her handwriting. He told his parents that she broke his toys even though she had never so much as touched one. All *that* she could live with. What she wouldn't accept was him calling her a liar when she denied his claim of her being the real reason he was sent home with a note.

A new student had still been fresh enough to the system to report to his teacher and parents that Dudley was bullying him. Dudley was only reprimanded at first, but the fact that someone told on him and received justice brought forth a slew of other children coming out of the wood-works to call Dudley out. The number of students alone, never mind the severity of what they were accusing him of, was enough to pin him down with several detentions and a note for his parents for a parent-teacher conference.

Once at home, Dudley — ever the deceptive one — gave his mother the note but immediately tacked on that the school had it all wrong and that it was actually **Heri** that had been bullying the other children, that Dudley had only been trying to stop her. When she refuted it, he called her a liar. Such a claim had Heri's blood boiling.

"How dare you say such a thing?!" Heri shouted, her fists clenched tightly. She was filled with outrage that seemed bigger than her body. She had never been so angry before. "How dare you call me a liar when you don't even know how to make a true statement?!

Petunia swelled in self-righteous indignity. She drew her son into her side as she snapped, "You dare call *my* son a liar? As if a rotten brat like you could say anything against my little angel!"

Heri was too fed up with it all to be cowed by a shouting adult.

"You'd believe him if he told you they were cancelling Mondays! I'm not surprised you'd believe even though half the things he's in trouble for I couldn't possibly have done!"

"Like what? More assignment stealing and breaking things I'm sure!"

"*I* certainly couldn't gather up his stupid friends and pants a boy in the boys' loo!" Heri jeered. "*I* certainly couldn't beat up on half the kids in our year and then threaten them to keep quiet!"
Heri glared harshly at her cousin who actually flinched under the look.

"How exactly just like a stupid boy! I've never said anything before about you blaming me for all the horrible nonsense you get up to, Dudley Dursley, but I will not be called a LIAR!"

"Keep your nasty mouth shut, girl!" Aunt Petunia shrieked.

At this time, likely the neighbours both next door and across the street heard their raised voices. Petunia Dursley was known for her shrill voice and Heri had no desire to hold herself back.

"I WILL NOT!" bellowed Heri. She stomped over to the door and threw it open.

"Go ask!" Heri gestured violently outside. "Go ask anybody — neighbours, children, teachers — and they will tell you exactly what kind of child you've raised! Open your ruddy eyes and see him for who he actually is! Look past your stupid delusions!"

"Get back in this house and close that door!" Aunt Petunia shouted.

By this time, neighbours had actually come out of their houses to see what was going on. Eyes were on them in morbid fascination as they screamed at each other.

"No, no, NO!" Heri stamped her foot in outrage. This temper tantrum had been a long time coming. She threw every bit of her pent-up anger at the injustice dealt to her. She glared at her cousin and snarled at him, "You tell the truth right now, Dudley Dursley, or I'll tell everyone your dirty little secrets! Don't think I don't know about the times you stole money from your mum's purse!"

Aunt Petunia had quite enough of making a spectacle and bodily dragged Heri back into the house. Heri went kicking and screaming.

Suffice to say that was the last time anyone tried to call Heri a liar. Her aunt and uncle were too frightened of the neighbours thinking badly of them and Dudley was too traumatised by all his deceptions coming back to haunt him to even bother her anymore.

The first time Heri spoke with the spirit that watched over her she was running around in the park, evading one of the stupid boys that tried to kiss her. It was after school on Friday and she had been told before she left for school that day that her aunt and uncle were taking Dudley to see the dentist in the afternoon, so Heri could do whatever the hell she wanted until they got back later. Her usual babysitter, Mrs. Figg, was too sick to watch her that day. She had taken the opportunity to play in the park without Dudley hogging all the good equipment.

It was four days until the end-of-year pantomime that the Latin students would perform. They were put into groups to organise skits or songs about the gods and their feats as a final project — bonus points if they could speak Latin during parts of it. Ideally, they would entertain the younger students and the visiting parents as well as show how much they had learned. For the end of the show, Mrs. Frederic, the Latin teacher, had pulled fourteen students from all the participating years to portray the Twelve Olympians plus Vesta and Pluto. They would tell the audience about themselves and their relation to the others.

Heri had been selected to play Diana, and she honestly couldn't be more excited. She identified with Diana (what little girl wouldn't?) and had been over the moon (no pun intended) since she had been chosen. Part of the assignment was to create a costume as well, and she had raided the local discount shop for cloth and sewing equipment, and spent every extra minute she had working on it.
She even fashioned herself a bow and arrow! When it came time for a dress rehearsal, Heri was a vision in her belted maiden tunic and sandals.

"Oh, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Frederic. "Aren't you just darling!"

Heri's outfit was the only one that wasn't store bought or just a bed-sheet tied up as a toga. The other girls looked pretty as well, but only Heri looked authentic.

That was when this nonsense with the boys started. They had gone from being too scared of her beating them up to have anything to do with her to bothering her almost constantly. It was like they collectively just realised that Heri was a girl! Granted, she never gave off a girly air, what with wearing Dudley's old clothes and getting into fights, but she didn't think she had looked like a boy.

The idiot that was chasing after her apparently thought differently.

"C'mon, Potter!" the twerp behind her called out. He was panting and looking peeved. "It's just a little peck! Think of it as practising for our roles!"

The moron trying to get a hold of her was a fifth-year student that was the bully of his year level. He had been chosen to play Apollo, god of the sun, because of his bright blond hair and loud attitude. He had been trying to prove himself by landing a kiss on her after she had whaled on him for flipping her skirt up. He was the only one that didn't give up for the day after she knocked him flat. As it was, Heri had tripped him trice, punched him four times, and led him in a merry chase around the park two times already. He'd almost pinned her once when her glasses slid down her nose and blinded her!

He was determined, she'd give him that.

"I've told ya like a billion times, Miller!" Heri called over her shoulder, jumping over a log that the boy tripped over. "Apollo and Diana are brother 'n' sister! They wouldn't be kissin' at all!"

"Jupiter 'n' Juno are brother 'n' sister too! They still got married!"

Damn him. For all that he was an arrogant toe-rag, the boy paid attention in class.

Heri growled, "The answer's still NO!"

It took sharp turn at the sandbox and a convenient gaggle of geese waddling by before Heri could shake him by scaling the fence enclosing the tennis court and springing herself up onto a tree limb. By the time Miller caught up again, Heri was over two metres up a tree with no branches close enough to the ground for him to reach. She made faces at him at his displeasure.

Miller stamped his feet and fumed but eventually accepted defeat. At least for one day. Heri watched him snatch up his backpack and leave the park with great relief.

Thank the powers that be!

"That was quite a chase."

Heri jolted at the voice coming from behind her. She swivelled around on her branch and caught sight of a young woman standing under the shade of the tree. Heri sucked in a breath, her eyes widening. It was the spirit!

"H-hello?" said Heri.
The spirit regarded her calmly.

"Hello."

"Umm . . . Was there something I could help you with?"

"No." The answer was so resolute, Heri felt her self-confidence take a blow. "Rather, there's something I can help you with."

Heri floundered, flustered for some reason.

"Oh, erm . . . well, then ah—"

"Don't stammer," the spirit reprimanded, her lips pinching a bit in displeasure. "It's very unbecoming."

Heri's mouth snapped shut and a flush spread across her cheeks. Never had she felt so inept!

"That's better." The spirit beckoned to Heri. "Come down from there. Don't dawdle."

Heri obeyed without question; there was something about the young woman that commanded immediate compliance. She swung herself around the tree until she was hanging by her arms and then dropped to the ground, bending her knees to absorb the impact.

The strange older girl observed Heri as she straightened. Her eyes were keen, taking in every hidden detail.

"Yes," she said. "You're coming along very well considering."

Before Heri could question the statement, she held out her arm, hand reaching toward Heri's face.

"You were doing quite well until those glasses got in the way. Come here so I may remove your need of them."

The run-ins with creatures trying to kill her on top of bullies and admirers trying to coax her into their grasps made Heri wary of people that tried to touch her. She would have liked to take the being's word for it, but she was still wary.

"And how will you do that? How do I know you're not just going to kill me?"

The extended hand lowered a touch as a look of irritation mixed with approval crossed the young woman's face.

"While I commend your caution, if I wanted to kill you, you would be dead already."

Fair enough. Considering all the time the spirit turned young lady spent watching Heri go about her business, it was believable that any harm meant would have been achieved already.

Girding up her resolve, Heri stepped within grabbing distance. She held her breath as her glasses were removed and a hand covered her eyes. She quickly exhaled and sucked in another breath with a sharp burning stabbed her eyes, shooting all the way to the back of her head. It was as if someone had shone the sun in her eyes and threw sand in her face at the same time only double! She slapped her hands over her eyes as soon as the other was withdrawn and keened at the pain of it.
"Covering them will bring you no relief," Heri heard the spirit in human form say. "Allowing them to adjust to the light would better suit your purpose."

Heri lowered her hands, doing as she was told. As the spirit had said, Heri's eyes adjusted quickly after one last sharp twinge. She blinked in the light incredulously. Everything was so clear! Not even with her glasses did she see details so sharply. It was as if the world had been dragged in closer as well as been painted more brightly.

"Is this how everyone else always sees?" Heri breathed in amazement, wondering at the beauty of the dust particles in the air.

"No," was the clipped reply. "I decided that regular human vision would be little improvement; if I was to cure you of your faulty eyes, I would ensure that there was true improvement."

"Oh." Harry wasn't sure what to say to that. "What kind of vision do I have then?"

"That of a bird's. Birds of prey see around eight times farther away. Likely you see colours not visible to the mammalian eye."

"Eight times?"

"Only when you purposefully focus," the spirit added. "Otherwise your perception is the same as any other human. Focus on your foreground to recenter your vision."

Heri did as suggested and breathed out a sound of amazement as her vision reoriented itself to better than what she had with her glasses but not out of this world. She smiled at the figure before her.

"Thank you!"

Almost imperceptibly, the stern visage soften. There was something like a smile that played on those lips before the uncompromising expression fell back into place.

"It was less for your own benefit than my own. Watching you bumble about, barely seeing past your own nose was bothersome."

Heri's lips twisted into a self-depreciating grimace. She fluffed her hair and shrugged.

"All that same, thank you very much."

"Think no further on it."

The spirit turned and began to walk way.

"Isn't there something I could do in return?" Heri called after her.

The young woman paused.

"From now on, send your prayers and thanks to the gods of Olympus."

Without another word, she dissolved into air.

The day of the performance, Heri shone like the sun breaking through the clouds. Her group
performed the story of Minerva and Arachne, the one about the creation of the spider and the folly of letting your pride guide you into foolish situations. Heri played the part of the narrator and one of the nymphs that admired Arachne's weaving.

The scene was set up with tables, chairs, lengths of cloth, and a bed-sheet stretched between two poles to act as a curtain. Heri stood on the outside of the curtain where the audience could see her. She stood in a bed-sheet fashioned into a toga like the other girls were wearing. Her sheet was a pale green and she had glitter all over her visible skin to show she was a nymph.

"Long ago," said Heri with her clearest enunciation. "There was a young girl, a shepherd's daughter, who started weaving at an early age."

Heri untied the sheet from the pole and stepped hurriedly to pull it aside, revealing a girl fussing over a large embroidery piece. The girl made large, exaggerated motions and held up the piece to admire it.

A pair of kids playing Arachne's parent entered and began to gush over the girl's work. Arachne preened under the praise and began to work harder, pulling out more and more lengths of decorated cloth from the table she had been sitting at.

"She became a great weaver. Her work was so well done, other girls from around the city came to see her at it —"

A trio of girls entered from the left, chattering about Arachne and her weaving.

"— Her work was so beautiful that even nymphs left their groves to admire her!"

From behind where Heri stood, two more girls dressed like she was made a show of whispering to each other, dragging Heri in as well when they reached her. The girls cooed and praised Arachne, going on and on about how lovely her weaving was.

"It's really amazing," said Heri, touching a length of cloth softly. "It's as if Minerva taught you herself!"

The other girls added their agreements.

The girl playing Arachne turned her nose up pointedly.

"As if I had to learn from anyone! I taught myself and any skill I have comes from me alone!"

The girls made cries of protest.

"Surely you have to thank Minerva!" cried an Asian girl with short hair. "She's the goddess of knowledge and skill! If she blessed you then that would be a wonderful thing!"

They went on in this vein, warning the girl to not speak so dismissively about Minerva. During this bit, one of the background girls slipped off behind the curtain and put on a grey wig. When Arachne again said she was far better than anyone that learned from Minerva, the girl in the wig cut in.

"I think I know a lot after living so long," said the girl in a put-on elderly voice. "I suggest you don't talk such a way about the gods. It's all well and good to say you're better than any other human, but to say you're better than a power than controls the world isn't very smart!"
Once again Arachne dismissed the advice, actually getting rude as well.

"Keep your advice for those that ask for it!" Such a statement drew murmurs of admonishment from the crowd. "I'll stand by what I say; I'm not afraid! If Minerva has a problem with it, she can come here and challenge me herself!"

The challenge was met by the girl in the wig throwing off the grey hair and replacing it with luxurious brown.

The crowd tittered.

The newly wigged girl straightened up importantly and said, "And here I am!"

"And so Arachne challenged Minerva again!" Heri chimed in, tripping lightly closer to the audience as she resumed her narrative. "She was extremely shocked but refused to take back what she had said!"

Minerva and Arachne glared at each other a moment before pulling out pieces of cloth and began working at them. As they 'worked' they made sounds of getting good ideas and excitement. The other girls drifted between the two, making sounds of admiration and whispering amongst themselves.

"Finished!" The two cried at the same time, holding their work in the air. They held it out to be looked over.

"Minerva made a piece about the contest she had with Neptune with the other gods watching them. Every person in the picture was lifelike and beautiful. It was perfect in every way!"

The girls oohed and ahhed over Minerva's piece, commenting on the people in it.

"Arachne, on the other hand, made a piece about the bad decisions Minerva's father, Jupiter, had made, mocking her and the gods. Everything was done up better than perfection, but it was still very rude!"

The girls groaned in dismay as they looked at Arachne's work, shuffling with unease and giggling nervously.

"Minerva admitted that Arachne's work was better than hers, but she wasn't about to let such disrespect go. She ripped up Arachne's canvas" — here Minerva stomped over and tore the cloth apart — "and then touched her forehead to make her feel the shame she should have felt at being so incredibly rude."

Arachne made a sound of horror and covered her face in shame, wailing. The other girls covered their ears and ran away at the noise. Then there was only Arachne, Minerva, and Heri still on the stage.

Minerva huffed and patted the other girl's back grudgingly.

"Minerva felt sorry for the girl," Heri continued. "But she wasn't about to let her off with a few minutes of well deserved guilt. To prevent her from hurting herself and to finish her punishment, Minerva turned Arachne into a spider!"

A black bundle was tossed over from off-stage and was caught by Minerva who shook it open.
and threw it over Arachne. The covered Arachne dropped a spider plushie to the floor as she rushed off stage. Minerva picked it up and showed the audience.

"Since then, the descendants of Arachne have been weaving the most beautiful of webs only for them to be destroyed later as punishment for Arachne’s original mistake. You should never let your pride get the better of you. Spiders are properly called Arachnids for a reason!" She finished off by throwing out plastic spiders for the first couple of rows to catch. Shrieks of shock and joy greeted the action.

The audience clapped and cheered and the girls came back on stage to bow and pose for pictures. They then vacated the stage for the next skit, taking a rest behind a blocked off section. The next group took the stage without delay.

Skit after skit past. Stories about the discovery of fire, The Judgement of Paris, the creation of horses were rolled out. Songs were sung, children danced, and the younger children were properly entertained. Harry laughed and clapped along with everyone else, not even Dudley being a part of the fun and the Dursleys sitting in the crowd took away from it.

When it came time for the final part, Heri donned her Diana costume and entered as the three youngest goddess were introduced. The eldest six, Vesta, Ceres, Juno, Pluto, Neptune, and Jupiter had been introduced in the order that had been born in. Heri prowled in after Venus and Minerva, head held high, her bow and arrow at the ready. She wasn’t anywhere near as tall as Diana was said to be, but she made up for it through force of personality.

"Ego Diana, dea venationis et lunae," said Heri, pointing her arrow at the ground. She saw the Latin teacher perk up out of the corner of her eye. Not many of the other children had done more than stuck a few Latin words in their sentences. "I am Diana, goddess of the hunt and the moon. Filia sum deus Iupiter et titana Leto. I am the daughter of the god Jupiter and the titaness Leto."

Heri went on to describe her position and background. She made sure to stay in character as well, speaking proudly of how she convinced her father to let her stay unmarried forever and the adventures she had been on. She couldn’t help but radiate the self-satisfaction Diana was known for because of the smugness she felt for how well she remembered her lines.

"Cultus mea dura est. Noviter venientes probatiores sunt in pugna. My followers are harsh and test newcomers in battle. Ut fieret sacerdos excelsorum, tecum pugnare usque ad mortem pontificis in duello. To become the high priest, you must battle the current high priest to the death!"

Heri played her part well and she knew it. It was written plainly in the way her fellow wannabe actors looked grudgingly impressed and the way Mrs. Frederic beamed at her from off stage.

She completed her address by whistling sharply as if she were calling to an animal and beckoned to the boys waiting for their turn.

"Venit hic, frater. Come on, Apollo, it's your turn now!"

She received a magnificent grade for the final project of course.

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Heri was dressed in new clothes Aunt Petunia had bought for her. They weren't really new as they had been picked up at a thrift store, but they were certainly better than the potato sacks she had worn before.
The neighbours that had children who went to school with Dudley and Heri had commented on how much more respectable she looked in clothes that actually fit her. Aunt Petunia had taken the comments as the neighbours thinking they were too poor to afford proper clothing, and had been spurred into outfitting Heri in clothes that hadn't belong to Dudley before.

Dressed in a blue pinafore dress over a grey button front and leggings, Heri could scarcely believe that the Privet Drive grapevine had actually done her a favour for one. It had increased the fervour of her admirers, true, but at least now no one thought she was a juvenile delinquent on sight.

On top of getting her new clothes, Aunt Petunia had nagged Uncle Vernon into letting her have Dudley's second bedroom since she didn't want Heri's new clothes to get ruined from staying in the cupboard under the stairs. Her relative's stinginess finally worked toward Heri's benefit.

Heri dug out her odd pocket watch and checked the time. It was ten minutes after school and she was only a third of the way back to the house. She had another twenty minutes before she absolutely needed to be back so she would have enough time to make prepare the veritable feast she was responsible for. Aunt Marge was arriving later that evening and the corpulent woman wasn't one to sit quietly if her food wasn't in front of her when she wanted it.

She muttered a prayer for the speed of Mercury or Hermes or whatever his name was (for some reason she preferred to think of them by their Greek names) and ran as fast as her legs could take her. Dodging other children and weaving through cars stopped at the traffic signs, Heri all but flew to her destination. If her legs had glowed briefly as she took her first running steps, she didn't notice.

Mrs. Figg was the only person Heri knew of that was nut-house strange while still being a perfectly average human being. Every time Heri was sent over to be baby-sat, she felt as if the woman was on the edge of snapping and going postal. Heri always had her best behaviour on when she was Mrs. Figg, her paranoia wouldn't allow any less of her.

Maybe it was the cats, Heri thought, dodging a white-furred menace by the name of Snowy.

Mrs. Figg was the stereotypical cat-lady with a dash of crazy thrown in. There were always at least one cat in the room no matter what room Heri entered. They were like a hive of horrific bees, always wandering about, ready to sink their pointy-parts into you at the slight provocation. And they were always watching. Those bloody cats watched with eyes far too intelligent for normal animals.

If it hadn't been for the fact that neither Mrs. Figg nor the cats had ever done her any harm beyond the occasional scratch, Heri would have been brandishing her monster-slaying box-cutter at the beasts and cutting them down before they could get a mew in.

Heri sat down gingerly on the sofa, sighing with resignation when another cat, Tibbles, leaped up and settled itself on her lap. There was no escape from them. She began to stroke its fur in the way she had seen Mrs. Figg do many times before. Apparently she was doing it correctly since the little beast started purring. She hoped it fell asleep soon as that was the only way she'd be able to remove it from her lap without it digging its claws into her clothes and ruining them.

Heri felt a tingle in her hands and she prayed for the cat to fall asleep. The purring became deeper before it slowly tapered off, Tibbles no longer awake. She gently lifted the cat from her lap and got up, looking at the hand that had been petting the animal. Putting animals to sleep just by petting them? Hell, yes.

Heri sized up the cats still wandering the house. Wasn't this a golden opportunity to practice
It was Harry's tenth birthday and she was grounded until next week. She hadn't been expecting anything considering how her relatives were, but being stuck inside without even chores to do was murder on her need to move.

Heri fiddled with her bronze box-cutter, sliding the blade in and out of its casing. She was in her room for the rest of the day for giving Aunt Marge's wretched dog a kick it well deserved. There had been a show of scolding her and ordering her to go away, but Heri was pretty certain that Aunt Petunia had sent her to her room to free her of Marge's presence, a reward for giving Ripper the sharp punt her aunt had been dreaming of giving it for years.

She was now sat on her bed, back to the wall, and staring out the window. It was such a lovely day out, shame that it was polluted with Marge's boorish presence.

The blade slipped out with a schlick at the thought.

Thoughts of Uncle Vernon's repellent sister brought forth thoughts on that monster dog Heri had wasted earlier that week. The thing had been the size of an Irish Wolfhound and had two heads! The only reason she hadn't died was sheer dumb luck — the thing had landed awkwardly as it pounced on her and ended up busting its paw. In the moment it had been whining in pain, Heri had slashed it at the base where the two heads met. It had exploded in a shower of dust, leaving behind fangs the size of her fingers.

Heri lifted her hand to stroke the chain of the necklace she had made with the fangs. She didn't know what else to do with them. She figured they could stay on her person as a reminder that life was fragile.

With a sigh, Heri flung her box-cutter at the dartboard Dudley had dumped in the room years ago when he lost all the darts.

The blade struck on the outer ring.

Heri frowned. Her aim wasn't nearly as good as she would have liked.

A wiggle of her fingers and sharp mental command had the box-cutter return to her hand handle-first. She caught it and flung it back immediately. Hmm, better, but still in the outer ring.

As she was about to call the box-cutter to her again, a movement from beyond her window caught her eye. There, sitting on a branch in the tree on the neighbour's side of the fence was an owl. How odd, she had never seen a wild owl before. Weren't they nocturnal? Heri's eyes sharpened automatically, getting a closer look at the bird. Her brain short circuited at the unbelievable sight.

The owl was the size of a large house cat with strange reddish-brown plumage. Its beak was long and golden, and it had great amber eyes. That wasn't the odd part though. It appeared to be eating the tail of a cat and it had two sets of legs. It was also looking right at her.

The bizarre bird and Heri locked gazes for a long moment. It didn't try to attack her like all the other supernatural beasts Heri had dealt with before, it simply sat there, eating its cat.

Without any fuss, Heri turned back to her target practice. She had seen enough to know that she didn't want to ask.
The bird continued to show up at random. Heri had caught sight of it perching in trees at her school, roosting on the roof of Mrs. Figg's house, and tearing into something while she tended to the garden. She would have been more bothered by the thing following her if it wasn't for the fact that it hadn't once been aggressive toward her.

What's more, it changed species of bird whenever it showed up. It had been an owl a few times more, but it was sometimes a pigeon, sometimes a crow, occasionally duck, and once even a woodpecker. The only reason she knew it was still the same bird was because of its glowing amber eyes, golden beak, and four legs no matter what form it took.

"Is there a reason you're following me?" Heri asked it.

It had been three weeks since she first saw it and it had wandered in and out of her life like a stray cat testing out a place to stay. Until she knew what it wanted, she didn't want it deciding that it wanted to stick around.

The bird blinked and cocked its head at her. Today it was a cuckoo, and it had been serenading her with "Ooh-woo" as she did her Literature homework in the park. If it had been any other cuckoo, Heri would have tuned it out automatically, but this one was perched on her table and crooning loudly at her to annoy her, she just knew it.

"Ooh-woo," it cooed again.

Heri sighed and slammed her book shut.

"Is that so?"

She'd have to do it later while it was off wherever it was when it wasn't hanging around her.

"Ooh-woo."

"If that's your final answer, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you go play somewhere else. This worksheet's due first thing tomorrow and you're being very distracting."

"Ooh-woo."

She got to her feet.

"Fine then! You stay here, I'll go finish my assignments up somewhere else. Good day to you."

She stuffed her books back into her bag and began to walked off.

"Ooh-woo . . ."

Her mind might've been playing tricks on her, but Heri could have sworn that the blasted bird sounded forlorn.

She cursed her sentimentality and turned back to the bird. Sure enough, its head was tucked into its shoulders. She sighed again.

"Look, it's not that I don't like having you around, but I really need to get my homework finished. I'm doing someone else's as well, and I need the money to pay for a library book Dudley destroyed. If you want to hang out, come again some time after tomorrow."
The bird visibly perked.

"Ooh-woo!"

"**DUDLEY! MR. DURSLEY! COME AND LOOK AT THIS SNAKE! YOU WON'T BELIEVE WHAT IT'S DOING!**"

Heri was at the zoo with the Dursley's and Piers Polkiss to celebrate Dudley's birthday. Normally she wouldn't have been brought along, but Mrs. Figg had broken her leg and wasn't in any state to watch Heri.

She had been brought along under strict orders from Uncle Vernon to behave as if she wasn't 'an unnatural aberration that blights mankind.' She had agreed only because she hadn't known her uncle knew words bigger than three syllables. She still gave him a hell of an itch in an indelicate place though.

At this point, they had already gone through the rest of the exhibits and stopped for lunch. The reptile house was the last stop before they would pack it in and call a day. Everything was winding down when Heri fell into a conversation with a boa constrictor. All chances of leaving peacefully were shot to hell with Polkiss' shout.

Dudley came waddling toward them as fast as he could.

"Out of the way, you," he said, shoving Heri aside.

Caught by surprise, Heri fell hard on the concrete floor. What came next happened so fast no one saw how it happened — one second, Piers and Dudley were leaning right up close to the glass, the next, they had leaped back with howls of horror. Heri sat up and gasped — the glass front of the boa constrictor's tank had vanished! The great snake was uncoiling itself rapidly, slithering out onto the floor. People throughout the reptile house screamed and started running for the exits.

As the snake slithered past her, Heri heard it hiss lowly, §Brazil, here I come . . . Thanksss, amiga.§

The look on her uncle's face when Piers mentioned that Heri had been talking to the snake boded nothing good. If only she hadn't thought it rude to ignore the snake when it proved it understood her — she never thought civility would be her downfall. Though she couldn't prove it, she was pretty sure someone up there was laughing at her.

Heri never received mail. Heri had never had a desire to receive mail. She didn't know anyone that would be in a position to send her anything, and even if there had been someone she wouldn't have had the patience to deal with any kind of communication that took longer than the span of a phone call. These were just some of the simple, insignificant facts of her life.

When Heri was sent to get the mail by her uncle, she didn't waste any time in bringing them to him without a second glance. No doubt they were all bills and advertisements. She returned to the maintenance of the pancakes without pause. This was probably why she had no idea why she and Dudley were rushed out of the kitchen not a minute later as if there was a bomb in the room.

In the days after, when letters came pouring and Uncle Vernon was on the edge of a mental breakdown, Heri would wonder if maybe she should have taken a peek at the mail pile before
handed it over. It was strange that her lack of curiosity was now backfiring on her after all these years.
Before Revelation, pt. 1

Chapter Notes

All chapters have already been written and published up to 12, so any change in plot you might want to suggest during this arc WILL be overlooked. I'm sorry, but I'm not going to change the set story just on a whim. Hit me up with ideas for the next arc if you want?

On a lighter note, props to you if you recognize the references I sneaked in this chapter.

H eri wasn't sure if Hagrid was blind or if four-legged owls were just a normal wizarding thing. Judging by the lack of extra appendages on the other owls she saw in the pet shop window, she was guessing not.

She gave the bothersome bird a dead-eyed look, one that it responded to with a cheery chuff. There was no question as to what bird this was despite the fact that instead of the nightmare-inducing Great Grey it had been the first time they saw each other it was currently a cuddly Snowy — the golden beak and extra legs gave it away. The only questions now were why no one else seemed to notice the oddness of the owl, and how in the nine circles of Dante's inferno had it managed to be in that particular pet shop and gotten itself purchased by the exact person meaning to buy a pet for Heri.

"D'yeh . . ." said Hagrid hesitantly. "D'yeh not like it then?"

He sounded disappointed.

Heri shook her head and craned her head back to look at him earnestly. It would not do to hurt the kindest person she had ever met!

"It's not that at all, sir! I was just shocked that you got me exactly what I've been wanting to get since we got here! How did you know I wanted an owl, sir? It even looks exactly like how I imagined!"

The owl puffed up importantly as Hagrid beamed. As Hagrid went on about the uses of owls and the handling of them, Heri shot it an oppressive look which it ignored by preening its wings haughtily. Cheeky thing — they were going to have a talk when she found the time, preferably when she wouldn't burn Hagrid's ears with the scolding she was planning on giving it.

Since Hagrid had found them hiding out on that rock in the middle of the sea, Heri had found herself tossed up into another whirlwind of the phantasmagoria that was apparently inherent to her reality. She had tried to be disbelieving when presented with the existence of magic — especially when her aunt and uncle were all but frothing at the mouth to deny any such thing — but really, discovering that there was a global population of people as reality-distorting as herself was ultimately unsurprising despite how relieving it was. Heri liked to be different, but she hadn't really thought she was the only one in the world with her powers; it was statistically improbable. When she was convinced Hagrid was not another monster aiming to do her in, Heri easily allowed him to introduce her to the world she had been born into.
Diagon Alley was every vivid dream, every unabashed noise, every unapologetic eccentricity Heri had never allowed herself to indulge in. It was all bright colours and unending movement, singular modes of dressing and unembarrassed personality. It was as if every misfit in the country was gathered for a convention to celebrate the unusual. Taking in the untroubled outspokenness of the people carrying on, Heri understood why her relatives were so against magic. To the neurotically 'normal' like the Dursleys, wizards represented everything they despised; they were plainly outcasts and comfortable with being so. Nothing was more unnerving to the unbendingly conventional than unashamed oddballs!

Hagrid and Heri had done a run of the shops as soon as Heri had gotten money from Gringotts. She had nearly swooned at the sight of all those coins and had all but walked on air as they bought school supplies. She had never had enough money to buy anything bigger than a deluxe pack of notebooks before and she was thrilled by being able to get absolutely brill things like equipment to make potions and books on doing magic.

Heri had just come out of Ollivander's wand shop with her new wand. ("Holly and Phoenix feather, a volatile combination," Mr. Ollivander had said. "That the handle is made of pomegranate makes me wonder what sort of greatness will be wrought at your hand.") A wand had been the last thing on her shopping list and she had to admit that she was relieved to be finished despite the fact that it had been a marvellous way to spend the day. Hagrid and she had been headed for dinner when he popped into Eeylops' Owl Emporium to buy Heri a birthday present. Now she was having a stare-down with the most nervy bird likely in existence.

"We ought to get a good, fillin' meal at the Leaky Cauldron," said Hagrid, leading Heri toward the way they had originally entered the shopping district. He seemed to take the staring contest between owl and owner as a bonding exercise. "Not as fancy as what we could get down Vertic but I reckon it's a bit more homey."

"That sounds wonderful," Heri replied. Her eyes had yet to leave the owl's.

"Aye, no place more down to earth’n the Leaky. What're yeh gon' name yer owl then?"

Heri did not look up.

"I'll have to think about it. Something that suits its personality of course."

Heri glanced up from the History of Magic book she had been flipping through after the third time she had read it through.

"How about Irmintrude? Or maybe Umbertio?"

If birds could look incredulous, the shapeshifting bird had the expression nailed.

Heri had been confined to her room since she had returned to Privet Drive and there was little else for her to do besides reading her textbooks. After immersing herself in the feats of the witches and wizards of her History text, she decided that the book would be an excellent place to find a name for her owl. For the past ten minutes she had tossed out names that she thought really communicated how she perceived the cheeky creature.

"No? How do you feel about Englegaard? Englegaard the Physician discovered the possibility of substituting chicken fat in place of avocado in weight-gain potions. Apparently it was hard to get a hold of avocado back then, and chicken fat was the best thing ever before sliced bread."
"Tch, so picky!"

Heri flicked back a few pages.

"How about Herpiderpicus? He's the reason why modern wand-safety regulations recommend not putting your wand down your shorts."

An affronted gurgling sound.

"Grimhildr? That's the male variation of the name of Grimhilde the Wicked, the tyrannical dowager-queen of an extinct Germanic kingdom. She ruled her husband's kingdom after he died and tried to kill off the crown princess when Her Highness grew to be more beautiful than Her Majesty. I'm guessing that's where the story of Snow White came from."

The owl responded with a grumbling grunt.

"Hogarth? I'm not sure what that means, but Hogarth of Heywood made contact with a tribe of giants and lived with them during the Giant Wars."

A bark of disapproval.

"Swims Like a Flailing Chipmunk? He was a chap native to the Americas that used the most unnecessary and ineffective way to cross over to England from the colonies."

Unhappy hoot.

"Hogsqueal?"

"Hoot."

"Glgrdsklechhh?"

"Hoot!"

"Bon'Quiqui?"

A fit of barks accented by flapping wings.

"Alright, I admit I made that last one up." Heri shrugged. "You know this would be a lot easier if you'd tell me if you're male or female."

The owl ruffled its feathers with indignity.

"None of that. I'm no expert on owls, I can't be expected to know your gender just by looking at you. Bark once for boy and twice for girl."

The blasted thing barked three times.

Heri huffed.

"And what is that supposed to mean? Are you a hermaphrodite or transgendered or something?"
She received a head bobble. Great. 'Cause that really answered her question.

"Flap a wing once for no and twice for yes. Are you a hermaphrodite?"

One flap.

"So you're transgendered?"

Could animals even do that?

Two flaps.


One flap.

"Oh, so you're male in body and female in mind."

Two flaps.

"I have to say, you're the oddest bird I've met, never mind the shapeshifting and extra legs part. Should I assume you'd prefer a girl's name then?"

She got a chipper chuff sound in response.

"Alright then."

Heri opened the appendix of the book and traced down the list of famous witches. Suggesting hideous names was all fine and good in jest, but it was time to find a proper name. She called out a few names of witches that later went on to be sainted by the Catholic Church but none of the appealed to the fussy avian.

Heri was beginning to get irritated.

"What about Hedwig? It means female warrior. Saint Hedwig of Andechs was the Duchess of Silesia and High Duchess consort of Poland. She's the patron saint of orphans."

The proud bird appeared to think on it for a moment. Just as Heri was about to suggest another name, the white owl crooned happily.

Heri cracked a smile.

"Should I take that as a yes?" At the continued cooing, she said, "Good choice. I think it's a very pretty name. Good thing for you too, because if you had taken any longer, I would have given it up as a bad job and just pinned you with Bon'Quiqui."

The growly sound Heri got in response told her exactly what Hedwig thought of such a thing.

"I beg your pardon, Your Eminence," said Heri, rolling her eyes. She set the history book to the side and picked up another book for a different class. "Now that we're done with your naming ceremony maybe we could concentrate on learning these constellations for astronomy. Your assistance will be invaluable of course."
In the early morning on the first of September, Heri got herself on a train headed to London. She had decided against asking her uncle for a ride to King’s Cross since he was still touchy after the scare on the Hut-on-the-Rock wherein Hagrid had given Dudley a pig's tail. She had tried to make it up to them by removing the tail, but none of them trusted her. They might have been taking Dudley to London that day to get the tail removed, but they certainly weren’t willing to take Heri along with them.

Hedwig was roosting in Heri's hair in the form of a bush-warbler. She wasn't willing to spend the trip stuck in a cage so had decided that part-timing it as an ornament was her best bet. Heri was fortunate that Hedwig's colouring was unobtrusive at the time or else she would have gotten stares for having a bird on her head. Heri had gotten a few looks for being a little girl riding the train alone but thankfully there were no child-predators around to creep on her. The ride to King's Cross was pleasantly uneventful.

She had a bit of a panic when she realised she didn't know how to get onto the platform. Hagrid, the lovable giant, hadn't mentioned anything about it beyond making certain she went to Platform 9 ¾. She was holding herself back from a crying jag at a bench near the pillar between platforms 9 and 10 when she noticed a pack of gingers behaving unusually at the pillar. One by one, the family charged at the pillar and disappeared into it instead of crashing.

Heri's mouth dropped open in shock. How was no one else seeing this?!

A quick glance around showed that no one else present noticed anything strange. Was this more of the Muggle-repelling Hagrid had told her about, magic to keep nonmagicals from noticing anything odd?

Heri watched the remaining redheads with sharpened eyes. If she was going to manage doing the same, she was going to have to make sure she did it right. She took them in with all the gravity of Atlas carrying the sky.

It turned out to be a very simple thing. There were no special words or motions for it, she just had to walk through without making any fuss of it. With time to spare, she made it onto the platform while families and parents were still milling around.

Heri felt a twinge in her chest as she took in the happy families and excited children. She wished... well, it didn't really matter what she wished, did it? It wasn't going to change the fact that she wasn't a part of the cheery, homey scene. There was no one there to see her off to school and wish her well.

A shudder of warmth spread up her chest from her belly. She stiffened and her eyes darted about. That was—! Heri's eyes landed a figure standing discreetly off to the side at the far-side of the train. Youthful, dark-haired, glacial expression: it was her guardian apparition!

The two of them took in the sight of each other impassively. When Heri thought the being would do nothing more than watch as usual, the being lifted a hand and tilted her head in a formal sign of greeting. Heri couldn't restrain the smile that lifted her lips. She lifted her hand as well and waved happily. At the show of her good-cheer, Hedwig hopped down to Heri's shoulder and nuzzled her, making her feel even better. She supposed she wasn't so alone after all.

Heri hopped onto the train as soon as the whistle blew for the last call. Her luggage was in her space-expanded satchel, so she immediately set off to find a compartment. Most of them already had people in them, many of the people looking like the sort that she doubted she'd get on with. Too crowded, too noisy, too obnoxious looking... What did she have to do to find laid-back people that
wouldn't expect her to interact with them, or better yet, an empty compartment?

Heri was considering somehow getting on the roof and spending the rest of the trip up there where she caught a glimpse of an uncrowded compartment with even-keel looking older students talking within. This was the first promising compartment she found since she got on the train. Maybe they'd be willing to put up with a first-year not looking to be a bother? One way to tell.

Heri patted Hedwig on the head and slid the door open.

**Marcus Flint** was a well-known, intimidating presence among the students of Hogwarts. He had arrived as tall as many of the third-year boys and had continued to grow at an alarming rate, reaching 6 feet 4 inches at fifteen, and promising to grow larger still. Unlike the lanky Weasley boys, Marcus filled out his height with muscle as well, and he used his bulk to great effectiveness while massacring the opposition on the Quidditch pitch as well as parting the crowds of herbivores like they were the Red Sea. With his buddies, Graham Montague and Lucian Bole — both intimidating as well — they were the current terrors of Slytherin House.

Marcus wasn't what anyone would call handsome. He wasn't ugly if evaluated fairly, but his teeth put one in the mind of a flesh-eating monster, his eyes were cold and narrow, and his face just naturally settled into provoking leer. He had all the charms of a muzzled attack-dog and he was perfectly fine with it. Graham was just as frightening even though Lucian actually had a few girls hooked on his stupid 'bad-boy' routine.

It was all this against him that had him surprised by the door of his usual compartment opening. Marcus and his friends had all but pissed on the door when they claimed this particular compartment back in his first year, scaring off anyone stupid enough to try to do something about it. Since then, rare was the person that voluntarily came around, usually ignorant first-years that didn't know to keep away. How odd — a quick glimpse of their snarly faces usually made quick work of the uninitiated.

It indeed appeared to be a first-year — a girl — and possibly muggleborn from the way she was dressed, a denim dress that ended about her knees and one of those sissy cardigan things. She looked like she was half dandelion or maybe sheep with how ridiculously fluffy her messy hair was. She was a titchy thing, all skinny limbs and big eyes. She looked like she wouldn't even come up to his sternum.

She kind of reminded Marcus of baby deer.

Marcus was struck with the urge to get to his feet, and he tensed at the odd impulse. He had never felt the need to stand at attention for anyone before and he certainly wasn't going to start doing so for a slip of a girl four years his junior no matter what his instincts told him. If Marcus' friends felt the same compulsion, they ignored it as well, aggressive sneers on their faces.

The girl took one tentative step in before she stopped flat and just stared at them, little mouth forming an 'o.' Her face was surprisingly solemn despite her wide-eyed look.

Graham grunted, "The Hell do you want?"

Graham somehow managed to be even less charming that Marcus. He was as burly as a bear with thick arms the size of ham legs. When he hit his growth spurt the year before, he had gone from stocky to outright bulky.

The girl didn't answer though her eyes did somehow manage to grow ever larger.
"Didn't you hear him, runt?" said Lucian, crossing his arms and giving the girl a flat look. "What the fuck do you want?"

The girl seemed to not hear the sandy-haired boy at all, her eyes zeroing in on Marcus and not looking away. She hadn’t even blinked once since she got there! Weird.

Lucian ruffled. He hated being ignored. Menace entered his tone.

"I said—"

"— sit here?"

Marcus frowned harder.

"What?"

The girl had just said something but it wasn't much louder than a breath.

"Sit here," the girl repeated. Her cheeks pinkened though her unblinking gaze didn't waver. "Can I?"

The three boys looked at each other. No one else had ever asked to stay after it had been made so abundantly clear that extras were not welcomed. Hell, no ignorant firstie had even wanted to come any closer after they got a proper look at them.

"Get lost, kid," sneered Marcus, leaning back against the seat. "Bugger off somewhere else before we make you regret it."

"'s crowded," she said, not looking bothered at Marcus' words. "An' loud. Please, can I sit? I won't make trouble."

Well, she certainly had a gift for brevity. He'd never met a less chatty girl in his life.

"Why the soddin' hell would you even want to?" asked Graham, a mulish look on his face. "Go fuck around with the other firsties, why don't ya?"

The girl's face hadn't changed beyond her eyes widening before, but it somehow now appear stony and determined.

"Wanna sit here," she insisted. "Please."

"Get lost!" Lucian jeered.

"Please."

Marcus started, "Kid—"

"Pleeease."

Marcus made a sound of annoyance.

"Oh, why the ruddy hell not?" he said, to the bother of his friends. He jerked his head in acquiescence. "Knock yourself out, midget."
The girl's face lit up, a bright expression Marcus had never seen directed at him. Without hesitation, she scurried from the doorway and climbed into the spot right next to Marcus, her face open and wondering. The bag she had slung across her shoulder was set beside her as she huddled up to him.

"The hell?" Marcus took in the girl all but clinging to his arm.

His friends snickered at his expression.

"I'm Heri," she said, peering up at him, finally blinking.

"Marcus Flint," Marcus replied. "Now back off before I break your face in."

Proving herself as the most contrary creature in existence, the girl actually scooted closer and wrapped her skinny arms around his forearm. She held on tightly and gazed at him with a serious expression he couldn't take seriously considering she was about as threatening as dairy-free milk.

"I like you," she declared. "When I grow up, let's get married."

There was disbelieving silence between the three boys.

"She's insane," Lucian decided at last. "It's the only thing that makes sense."

"I'm not!" the girl huffed, the beginning of a pout on her lips.

In a fit of insanity, Marcus thought the look was quite cute on her. He immediately crushed such a thought of course.

"The hell you're not!" Lucian retorted. "Why else would you be proposing to the owner of this mug?"

She gained a stubborn look, pulling Marcus' arm into her chest.

"He's big, and strong, and-and . . ." she trailed off with the red stains on her cheeks darkening. "And it doesn't matter if he's pretty or not; being pretty can be my job."

Marcus tried to yank his arm back but ended up dragging the girl along with it. Damned obstinate chit.

"What about all that gender equality thing girls are always harping on about?" Lucian asked, too amused to be annoyed any longer. "I don't need any man!' Or whatever? My sisters won't shut up about it."

"Mine too," said Graham.

The girl glowered.

"Didn't say I need him. Said I want him. I bet he can beat up anyone he wants!"

"Who cares about all that?" bellowed Marcus. He scowled at the girl hanging onto him like a limpet. "Save your proposals for someone else; I'm not interested in flat-chested little brats that don't even know how to hold their wands yet! You want a boyfriend? Go ask someone closer to your own age!"
She frowned and looked at her chest. She was still as flat as a boy.

"I'll grow," she said earnestly. "I'm not asking for right now, I want you for when I grow up."

"Fuck off," Marcus growled.

The opinionated little bitch pinned him with a dewy-eyed look that put baby unicorns to shame.

"Don't send me away," she said. "I just wanna stay with you."

Well, hell. How was he supposed to be a bastard when she said things like that? That was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to him.

Marcus groaned heavily and rubbed his face with his free hand.

"Soddin', fuckin'... Whatever," he said finally. "Just sit there and keep your trap shut and you can stay."

Lucian and Graham's amused expressions told Marcus exactly what they thought of him bending to the whims of an eleven year old. Well, fuck them. If they had the dubious pleasure of the girl's insistent attentions, they'd learn to compromise as well.

The three boys fell back into their previous conversation, purposefully overlooking their newest addition. With luck, the girl would get distracted by something at school before too long.

(Meanwhile, Heri was overwhelmed with bewilderment and awe. Was this love? She never expected it to come on so fast . . .)

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Heri watched the rest of the Sorting politely from her seat at the Hufflepuff table. She thought it was rather unmannerly of them to pause the process for so long just to get a good amount of gaping at her in. Honestly, there were other people to get situated and hungry people waiting for their dinner — gawking at 'celebrities' could be put on hold for later.

She had had an interesting conversation with the Sorting Hat. It said things like "Haven't had one like you in a while!" and "Hmmm, two parts of your nature are very contradicting." Harry hadn't understood why such a simple thing as deciding her most defining character trait was taking so long and had prayed to Janus, god of decision-making, for the Hat to make its choice swiftly.

"Oh-ho!" the Hat had chortled. "You give veneration to a pantheon of gods accepted as mythology. Now, what does that say about you?"

Heri had frowned. She didn't care much either way what was thought to be true or false, especially concerning where she sent her prayers, since she had plenty of reason to believe. Hadn't her guardian spirit told her to send her requests for divine intervention and thanks to Olympus? She wasn't about to be a good-for-nothing ingrate and deny such a simple request from someone who had always been kind to her!

"Ah, I see now. You are steadfast in your convictions and loyalties. Such strength of character to follow through on your word might have sent you to Gryffindor, but I can tell now that you'll be best served in HUFFLEPUFF!"

Since then, Heri had been caught up in the process of politely convincing her new House-mates
that they were all better off paying attention to the unsorted first-years. So far she had average results.

She smile awkwardly at the overenthusiastic brunette talking her ear off and tilted her head as a sign that she was listening. Really, Heri didn't know what to say in response to the girl chattering on a mile a minute at her, but thankfully only the barest hint of attention was required to appease the other girl, Megan Jones.

"Have mercy, Jones," griped a blond boy across the table from Heri. "You might not care about the Sorting, but some of us are trying to pay attention."

Jones flushed angrily.

"And who are you to tell me what to do?" she snapped.

The boy gave her a flat look.

"Zacharias Smith of the Smith family that can trace their lineage back to the time of the Founders. Now close your mouth and give the rest of us a bit of courtesy."

Heri patted Jones arm to comfort the other girl as she swelled with offence. Heri shrugged and rolled her eyes to show Jones there was no point in being angry. They shared an embarrassed giggle.

The Sorting dragged on, the remaining students seemingly trying to follow Heri's lead by taking forever to be placed. When 'Zabini, Blaise' was finally put in Slytherin, Heri almost breathed a sigh of relief. (Almost. She might have hurt Jones' feelings if she had.) A kingly feast appeared on the table before them and was tucked into with great gusto. She hadn't eaten anything that day besides a few pasties on the train, and that had been half a day ago.

As they ate, Heri was bombarded with questions. What's it like being Heri Potter? (Well enough she supposed; she had never known any other way of being.) Why had she been living in hiding? (She hadn't known she had been.) Where had she been living? (Really none of their business.) Could they get a look at her scar? (Weird but okay.) Did she really wrestle a troll when she was eight? (She didn't remember any troll, but there had been a cyclops.) Why was she attending school when she was already so powerful? (Powerful or not, turning down a quality education would be shortsighted.) Would she take a picture and autograph it for them? (Well, if they really wanted to . . .)

It was overwhelming. Hagrid had explained it to her that she was famous, but Heri hadn't realised that it was more superhero famous than passing oddity famous. She had expected "Hey, isn't that the girl that survived the Killing Curse? How weird!" not "OH, MY GOD! It's the girl that survived the Killing Curse! Somebody call my mum!" Well, Heri supposed the fuss was mainly because Voldemort had exploded into dust as well when he was trying to kill her; now that she thought more about it, that was likely the main reason. Still, people paying homage to her for her amazing talent in not dying was bewildering.

Going to bed later that night, Heri hoped all the fuss would blow over after a few days. Surely after the others see how unexciting she really was they would move on.

Two weeks later — during a transfiguration lesson wherein she had transfigured her matchstick into a needle on the first try and earned Hufflepuff twenty points — Heri realised that the attention she was receiving wasn't going to be fading any time soon.
Zacharias Smith wasn't sure how he felt about Heri Potter. On one hand, she was a pleasant girl that he got on with better than he would have expected, what with his distaste for most of the girls he grew up with. She also brought pride to Hufflepuff for housing the Girl Who Lived. On the other hand, he had been expecting to be the most important student in their year, what with him being a descendant of Helga Hufflepuff herself as well as being a son of a goddess (though which goddess he didn't know yet since his father said that he was to find out when she revealed herself to him). It was true that he wasn't allowed to let anyone but the other children of divine descent know about his heritage, but he had expected to at least be able to comfort himself knowing he was the most unique of the first-years. He had forgotten that Heri Potter was his age.

When he had set sights on her, Zacharias knew that there was something about her. Others might have attributed it to charisma or her magical prowess shining through, but he knew there was more to it than that. Even before her name had been revealed, eyes had been on her. She was short but she felt like the tallest among them; she didn't make a spectacle of herself but they were all aware of her. Zacharias had never met someone with such presence before, not at that age.

"I feel like I need to stand whenever she enters a room," said Ernie Macmillan, a legacy of Clio, the Muse of History. Zacharias and Ernie had known each other since their diaper days. Ernie had noticed the same thing as Zacharias about Potter. "It would feel like ignoring... I dunno — the minister maybe — if I didn't."

It was like that for everyone, Zacharias had noticed. They would snap to attention as if they were in the presence of royalty. Was it an instinctive reaction to her fame, or her family's importance maybe? He just couldn't understand it.

Heri Potter was all quiet self-confidence wrapped in a mannerly outer-shell. She had the whole of Hufflepuff eating out of her hands the moment she sat down and even now, after the novelty had faded a bit, they still flocked to her like lambs to their shepherd. He didn't think he'd ever seen her without at least two other people hanging around beside her, honestly enjoying her presence beyond the giddiness of talking to someone famous. He didn't know how she did it; mutinously, he wondered if she had somehow been manufactured by some higher power out to torment him.

It was as if she could do no wrong! Zacharias was not ashamed to admit that he was part of the herd that accompanied Potter almost everywhere, it was the habit of Hufflepuffs to travel in packs, so it was only good sense that he be part of the most popular. He saw as she divvied up her attention in such a way that no one was overlooked, but whoever currently had her attention was given the full of it. He saw her take careful notes in class that she later shared without compunction. He had sat in the row behind her as she succeeded in transfiguring the matchstick before even the Ravenclaws.

If all that wasn't enough, she had somehow managed to wriggle herself into the dubious regards of the Slytherin upperclassmen, specifically the fourth- and fifth-years. When Potter had made a beeline to the Slytherin table the morning of the first day of school, Zacharias had thought she was completely bonkers, a sentiment others of their House seem to agree with when they saw exactly who it was Potter was seeking out. Zacharias had heard horror stories from his older friends about Marcus Flint and his cronies, none of which were flattering.

Potter had all but climbed into Flint's lap, cuddling up next to him and sparkling up at him with an expression of blatant adoration. There had been a moment in which no one even breathed, too struck by the little girl curling around the terrifying fifth-year as if he was a cuddle-toy. Then Flint heaved a resigned sigh and returned to his eating. His bullying friends guffawed hideously but made no motion to remove Potter, one of them even shoving a plate in her direction when she made no movement to feed herself.
It was utterly baffling.

Later, when being interrogated about it, Potter told them that she had met Flint, Bole, and Montague on the train, and she had found them to be perfectly agreeable company. Zacharias wondered if she would eventually wander back to the dorms with a cerberus trailing behind her and tell them that she had found it abandoned in a box and that she didn't have the heart to leave such a sweet creature to fend for itself.

Heri had a following. It was to be expected, she supposed. Still, she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do with them. She might have called them her friends if it hadn't been for the blatant hero-worship they exuded. It turned out that being world-famous and being Sorted into Hufflepuff meant being the best thing since indoor plumbing to her fellow badgers. She wished they would dial down the awe though, since she didn't know how to live up to their expectations, but somehow Heri's awkward waving off of their adulation made them adore her even more — something about being admirable in her modesty.

All the attention made it incredibly hard for Heri to relax. By day she entertained a posse of Girl Who Lived fans between classes and during meals. She worked her people-skills to the bone, leading games and telling amusing stories. By night she was pandered to by her dorm-mates who couldn't get enough of doing hair and painting nails and whatever other frivolity with her. She was expected to give them tips on style while they drifted around her like ladies-in-waiting to their princess. It was exhausting work. Thankfully, they took her occasional fumbles as quirks from living the exciting life they presumed she had.

She had never dealt with such a large collection of people that didn't think negatively of her right off the bat before, and it turned out that dealing with kindness was somehow less simple than disdain. With people that thought she was a bad seed, Heri could just be however she wanted without any concern of what they thought, because their opinion of her couldn't get much worse than it already was. But with people that admired her, she felt obligated to behave and treat them kindly. She knew how crushing disappointment could feel and she wouldn't wish it on anyone. These people expected greatness from her — she wasn't about to just roll over and die under the challenge.

Heri spent several weeks being as sweet as summer honey. She hadn't known she was physically capable of being as mild-tempered and friendly as she had been when she was so used to smacking down losers that had it in for her. 'Nice little girl' wasn't a persona she had thought would ever suit her. Apparently, she managed it well enough. She rather liked it as well — no one tried to pick fights with her at all.

Truthfully, being 'nice' wasn't that far from her unbothered attitude from before — all she had to do was have zero interaction with people that made her angry, simple when the people surrounding her wanted so badly to be friends with her. She also had to hold her tongue, a habit she already cultivated from living with the Dursleys. She used to let her sharp tongue run free at school when people came asking for it, but such a practice wouldn't do her any favours at Hogwarts.

"Do you think I should braid my hair today, Heri, or leave it down?" Sally-Anne Perks had asked her while they primping before breakfast.

"It's very fluttery when it's down, but the braid you use is pretty on top of being practical."

"Hey, Potter, can you help me with my transfiguration homework?" asked Roger Malone one weekend evening. He and Oliver Rivers were the most Ravenclaw-y of the bunch and took their homework seriously.
"Of course. Could we work on astronomy afterwards as well? I've heard you're brilliant at it."

"Could you sign this for me, Heri?" Hannah Abbot once inquired, holding a picture book that told the bedtime-story version of the night Voldemort exploded. "My little cousin is your biggest fan!"

"If you want me to. Is this the same cousin that reads the Young Merlin Mysteries? I like that series as well."

Left and right, Heri worked the crowd. All she really had to do was treat them kindly and pay attention to their interests. Considering they were going out of their way to do the same for her, Heri thought it was only common decency that she did the same.

Heri's regression into juvenile delinquency came suddenly. Actually, it came in two parts, but — well, both occurred on the same day, so perhaps it still counted as 'sudden.' In any case, it happened unexpectedly.

Flying lessons were on the agenda, and every first-year was keyed up. Depending on the kid, they took out their worked up energy in different ways. Some used productive outlets like researching flying methods or bragging about the flying they did at home. Others took it out on others; bullying picked up, Malfoy and his goons being the most voracious.

Draco Malfoy was every stereotype against Slytherin Heri had ever heard of, and he seemed to revel in it. Even worse (in Heri's opinion), he was all bark, rarely any bite; he talked big but left all the actual harassment to his bodyguards. Heri was of the opinion that if you were going to be a certain way, you commit to it, you don't shove off parts of it on someone else — if Malfoy was going to be a bully, he should have at least dealt out some damage himself. The only time Malfoy put any shots in was when the other person's back was turned and there were no teachers nearby. Heri hated anything half-arsed and she had been itching to give the ponce a pounding since she first saw him.

By a twist of fate, Professor Sprout was too sick to work that day and couldn't watch over the first-year Hufflepuffs during the free period before their Flying lesson. It was decided that the Hufflepuffs would join the Slytherins' and Gryffindors' flying lesson during that time. The entire gaggle of them huddled off to the side of the rival houses — Heri situated in the middle as was usual for a Hufflepuff 'leader' — and trying to not get involved in the inter-house power-plays.

The entire lesson was a comedy in errors. Over half of those present couldn't get their brooms off the ground the first round of shouted "Up!" and even those that did manage didn't hold the broom properly. Not even Malfoy with all his bragging did it correctly, whining that he had been holding it that way all his life even as Madam Hooch told him flat out that it was wrong. Limbs were dinged, children were embarrassed, and insults were thrown about.

Madam Hooch had her work cut out for her.

It almost came to a violent end when Neville Longbottom nearly lost control of his broom and flew off. Thankfully, he had been standing next to Heri, and she had pulled him off the busted thing just as it shot off into the atmosphere.

When Madam Hooch finally got everyone into the air in one piece, and everyone was handling themselves reasonably enough, she brought out Quidditch equipment for them to play with. Training Snitches were buzzing about, Quaffles were being tossed around, and Bludgers were hurling through the air. All the students were spread out in groups, playing with the flying balls.
Heri was trailing after a training Snitch with Megan Jones, Wayne Hopkins, and Hannah Abbott: her three most enthusiastic cheerleaders. They were zipping through the air, laughing as they went, making grabs for the Snitch when they got in range. It was just as she was zeroing in on the winged ball that she saw something that made her blood run cold.

There, not a hundred yards from where she was flying, was Justin Finch-Fletchley and some boys from Gryffindor talking, not noticing the Bludger speeding in their direction.

"Justin!" Heri cried, pouring on the speed to reach them. "Look out! Get out of the way!"

The boys looked up in confusion as Heri came rushing at them, but they moved too slowly. One of them spotted the Bludger and hollered his own warning as he dove off, but in the scramble to move Justin got stuck upside down and couldn't straighten himself.

Holy Hera, he could die!

In her panic, Heri screeched up in front of the boy. She pulled her fist back and —

CRACK!

The Bludger went careening back the way it came.

Holding herself back from gaping, Heri noticed that her fist shimmered pale pink.

Suffice to say the uproar was immense. Hoots, hollers, screams, even tears were thrown her way. Heri's ears were ringing.

"Y-you — you just — a-a-and then it — OH, MY GOD!" Heri wasn't certain which one of her fangirls shrieked it, but that was basically what everyone had to say about her feat, Madam Hooch included.

Hufflepuff was awarded fifty points for saving another student's life and Heri was all but carried off the training ground on the shoulders of her Housemates.

The crowd of first-years that were part of the Flying lesson buzzed around for the rest of the day. Heri didn't know about them, but she was still hyped up on adrenaline. That was the first time anyone else had been in danger of death in front of her and it somehow made a bigger impression on her than when she herself was in danger. Someone almost died in front of her! Goodness, why was no one else bothered about that?

It was in this twitchy frame of mind that she came across Malfoy and his bookends harassing Longbottom. She had told her posse to meet her in the Great Hall while she popped off for a minute to visit the loo. Never had she wished before that she had more witnesses around to testify what she was seeing.

Neville Longbottom was a gentle soul of a retiring disposition that made Heri wonder why he was in the House of the brave. Sure, it took guts to live amongst the bodacious and reckless, but she felt he might have had a better time of it in Hufflepuff. At least with the 'Puffs he wouldn't be taunted for not being loud and proud.

They were in a lesser used corridor leading to the Great Hall. The doors were in throwing distance, but the hallway wasn't trafficked like the others. The three yobs were pushing Longbottom around just outside of the sight-range of the Great Hall. They tossed around some sort of bauble that Longbottom did his damnedest to get back despite their shoving.
"You want this stupid thing, do you, Longbottom?" said Malfoy, smiling nastily. "Too bad that it's mine now!"

Heri quivered with suppressed agitation. She wanted to go over there and pound Malfoy's face in, but she really didn't want to get in trouble for beating up another student. Snape for sure would come down on her like the hammer of God if he caught her bloodying up his wretched pets.

The boys sniggered meanly and gave Longbottom another harsh shove, this time sending the boy falling to the ground. He landed on his side and cried out when he slammed his elbow. He tried to get up again when the Slytherin boys started to walk away, but Malfoy sent a kick to the hand propping him up.

The blond boy tossed the bauble in the air and caught it again.

"Maybe if you had given this thing a squeeze you would have remembered how to land on your fat arse!"

As the Slytherin boys walked away, Heri stalked up to where Longbottom was shakily getting up again. She caught him up by his elbow (the same place she had pulled on him when getting him off his defective broom) and hoisted the boy to his feet. He startled badly but pulled himself back together when he saw who it was.

"A-ah, P-P-Potter . . ." He could barely get the words out, he was shaking so badly.

"They took something of yours, didn't they?" said Heri, not really asking. She burned the boy with her stare, daring him to try to deny it.

Longbottom looked wary at her expression.

"Y-y-yes. I s-suppose I'll g-g-get a p-profess-sor later—"

"Never mind a professor," said Heri briskly, pulling the boy along with her as she strode toward the Great Hall. "We're going to get it back right now, and I'll be having some words with Draco Malfoy."

Longbottom protested weakly but he really didn't have the will-power to go against Heri at the moment, not when she was practically spitting fire.

The Great Hall was empty of teachers at the moment, only the prefects and Head Boy and Girl were there to keep order.

Heri strode to the Slytherin table like a woman on a mission, Longbottom's arm still firmly within her clutches. She stalked up to where the first-year Slytherins were eating and came up behind Malfoy as he was bragging about his theft.

"Malfoy," Heri hissed, hoping to burn holes into the pompous boy's head with the intensity of her stare.

The blond idiot turned and sneered at them when he saw who was there.

"Haven't had enough?" he taunted Longbottom. He turned back to Heri. "You should find yourself better company, Potter. Why don't you stop messing about with losers? Bad enough that you got yourself sorted with the duffers, hanging around cowardly lions like Longbottom will only drag you down further."
Longbottom hunched into himself.

"I'll thank you to keep such opinions to yourself," Heri said tightly, trying to keep herself from scowling at the brat. She had been doing so well with being non-confrontational, she didn't want Malfoy to be the one that got her fighting again. "We're here to get back what you took. So hand it over if you please."

The other first-year Slytherins were watching the exchanged. Sceptical expressions on their faces, they seemed to be surprised that Heri had the guts to go against Malfoy.

Malfoy wrinkled his nose at her.

"Championing the cause of the pathetic now, are you? I understand that you're some big hero, Potter, but you're taking it a bit too far. Make friends in better places — I could help you there."

For a moment, Malfoy looked expectant and Longbottom looked resigned. Such a combination sparked the flames of fury Heri had been trying so hard to keep banked.

"It's no business of yours who I make friends with!" Heri snapped, allowing her face to fall into the violent glare she had been holding back. "Neville Longbottom is good person, and far better company than you could ever offer!"

Her fall from character made her want to curse. Damn the dratted boy! Damn him to the deepest pits of Tartarus!

"If I had to choose between you and a disease-ridden goat-fucker living in the squalour of their own filth," she continued, getting into it, "I'd be turnin' down yer manky, minger arse every single soddin' time!"

Malfoy flushed in visible outrage.

Damn, but it felt good to get it all out! Heri pushed on.

"Now, give us back what ya stole or I'll break yer goddamn face in!"

Malfoy scoffed, face as red as a slapped arse, and beckoned his goons forward. The two trolls cracked their knuckles in a way that was supposed to be intimidating.

"Just try it, Potter! I don't know who you think you are, but Crabbe and Goyle aren't bothered about putting a stupid little girl in her place!"

Heri growled. She'd show them a stupid little girl!

Longbottom tugged at her hand insistently.

"Please, Potter, I don't want us to fight about this. It's not that important anyway!"

"That's right, run along now, little coward!" derided Malfoy.

Heri shook off Longbottom's hand and took a threatening step forward.

"I'm warnin' ya, arsehole. Hand it over or I'll send ya bitchin' and cryin' for mummy."

Malfoy's response was to sic his goons on her.

Once a meaty paw landed on her forearm, Heri sprang into action. She kicked Goyle's feet out
from under him as she yanked him off balance. She hurled him into Crabbe, sending both to the floor. Their heads banged against the stone and they laid there, stunned.

Before Malfoy could do more than blink, Heri caught him by the shoulder and sucker-punched him in the jaw. (She pulled back at the last minute, of course — it wouldn't do to break his jaw.) He went tumbling on top of his goons before Heri shoved him off the pile with her foot.

Crabbe was in the midst of staggering to his feet again, but Heri whacked him across the back of his head with her forearm, propelling him forward to smack his head on the ground again. He fell half on Goyle and half on top of Malfoy, knocking the breath out of the blond boy.

With the two apes knocked out, she pulled Malfoy out of the dog-pile enough to twist him onto his front and yank one of his arms up behind him in a locking hold. He had to sit up painfully on his knees and arch his back to keep her from dislocating his arm when she straightened.

She had the three stooges laid out in less than ten seconds, not even long enough for any prefect to realise a fight was happening. Luck was on her side this time around — they were located in the space between the Slytherin table and the wall, effectively hiding the confrontation from everyone but those in the immediate area.

She loomed over Malfoy and put her knee to his lower back, warning him to stay put. She jerked his arm back sharply and pressed her knee in when he opened his mouth to undoubtedly insult her again.

He groaned in pain.

"I warned you, Malfoy," she hissed. Heri was reminded of another confrontation she had before that oddly went the same way this one was going. Her anger was fading, returning her to a less colourful way of speech. "Did you think I was kidding?"

"Psychotic bint!" the blond boy spat.

He grappled for the wand in his pocket, but Heri twisted his wrist as his free arm came up, making him drop it. It rolled off to the side, too far away to be of any more use. She shoved him down and flipped him onto his back with her foot. She ground that same foot into his upper thigh as punishment.

He keened pitifully, his hands spasming ineffectively.

Really, were all the jumped-up morons trying to prove themselves against her going to follow the same script? If they were, she wasn't going to go through the trouble of treating them any differently from each other.

"I asked if you thought I was kidding," Heri mocked. "Not what your mother should have named you. Now, are you going to do as I've said or am I going to have to persuade you further?"

Malfoy shot glances at his fallen bodyguards, obviously calculating his chances. Heri lifted her foot from the boy's thigh only to nail him in the side, forcing him to curl up in pain.

"It's very simple, Malfoy," said Heri. She crossed her arms and stared down at him with no pity. "You can either hand over the trinket and salvage whatever's left of your pitiful dignity when we leave, or you can be a ruddy moron and I'll send you to the Hospital Wing with a thrashing so harsh, not even your own mother will recognise you after ward."

Proving himself self-preserving enough for Slytherin, Malfoy surrendered Longbottom's bauble.
As Heri ushered Longbottom away, she shot a sharp look at the gawkers that had made no motion to help the three boys. Some looked upset, others looked gobsmacked. They all jolted under her gaze.

"Get those idiots to the Hospital Wing," Heri said. "With luck, they'll be right as rain in time for the afternoon lessons."

Heri earned herself an enemy that day, but she also gained a fiercely loyal supporter. Considering how little she thought of any danger Malfoy might pose, Heri considered it a job well done and well compensated for.

Neville Longbottom was amongst the people who wondered how he got into Gryffindor, let alone Hogwarts. He wasn't like his dorm-mates, he didn't perform attention-drawing feats, and his spell-work was average at best. No one would ever write epic poetry about Neville.

No one ever paid much attention to Neville in general unless it was to pick on him. Beyond Professor Sprout, rare was the person that had something kind to say to him or about him. Most of the time, they weren't even trying to be hurtful, they just didn't care enough to notice that they weren't exactly being kind. It was that way with the people of his House; they didn't purposefully mistreat him, but the casual disregard cut him just as deeply as if they had.

Neville had gone to the flying lesson expecting to humiliate himself in some horrendous way. His Gran had forbidden him from touching a broom when he was younger for a reason, and he knew fully well that his clumsiness wasn't going to miraculously disappear on the day he were learning to fly. If he didn't end up with some broken bone, it would be through divine intervention.

As if to set the stage for his public disgrace, Gryffindor was to learn with Slytherin that day. Just what he wanted, to make a prat of himself in front of snooty blood-purists like Malfoy and his ilk. And if that wasn't bad enough, Hufflepuff was added to the class as well. When the crowd of Hufflepuffs arrived — laughing and cheery, with Sally-Anne Perks, Hannah Abbott, and Heri Potter, their three prettiest girls, giggling excitedly from within the pack — Neville knew any shame he suffered that day would follow him until his death.

His death nearly came sooner than anticipated when the shoddy school broom he was using starting flying away with him still on it. It was only by the grace of the powers that be that Heri Potter managed to haul him off the broom in time.

He thought his face would melt off from the heat of his blush when he realised she had wrapped her arms completely around his middle during her rescue of him. Heri Potter had wrapped her arms around him! Neville reddened just at the thought.

Neville had thought he had dodged a curse when the lesson ended with him in one piece and not a laughing-stock, but it was not to be. Malfoy and his trolls ambushed Neville on his way to lunch and had taken the Remembrall his Gran had sent him just that morning. They made a game of tossing it to one another while Neville tried to catch in from out of the air. He panted and wheezed and prayed that even if they stole it from him completely, they wouldn't destroy it; his grandmother had sent it to him and it was precious to him.

He was a trembling pile of pathetic teetering back onto his feet after the terrible trio finished their fun when Potter appeared out of nowhere and helped him to his feet. He had never seen her look anything but cheerful and unbothered — the fierce expression on her face was one that resembled McGonagall looming over misbehaving student and it put him off balance.
He tried to brush off the situation when she asked about it, telling her he'd go talk to a professor about it later even though he wouldn't. Potter didn't accept the brush off and sent him a stern look that would have sent him crying if it had been him that she was upset with.

"We're going to get it back right now," Potter told him, setting her unwavering sight in the direction Malfoy had went. Neville had seen a similar expression on his Gran after Uncle Algie had dropped him out a window. "And I'll be having some words with Draco Malfoy."

Neville wasn't sure what Potter was meaning to do. She was a mild-mannered girl from Hufflepuff and Malfoy was an aggressive elitist from a family with a shady background, a Slytherin to boot. Surely she didn't think she could talk Malfoy into returning Neville's property?

The conversation went along in the same manner Neville had expected: Potter firmly but politely requested Malfoy to give Neville his Remembrall back and Malfoy let his condescension fly freely by degrading Neville, insulting Potter, and had then tried to coerce Potter into going to the dark side. Malfoy had spewed such abuse against Neville that Neville became dispirited enough to begin to believe that Potter might actually just give up on him and accept Malfoy's offer.

Such a thought was tossed out the window when Potter seemed to snap and flung out the filthiest invectives Neville had ever heard into Malfoy's gobsmacked face. She used words he'd never even heard of before! Neville had never witnessed a lady cuss before and the experience was increasingly singular.

He thought they were going to wind up in a sticky end when Potter threatened Malfoy with physical violence, which the blond boy responded to by reminding her of Crabbe and Goyle's presence. Neville had tried to convince her to walk away but Potter wasn't having it.

The situation become hostile the moment Goyle actually laid hand on Potter.

Neville thought he was going to have to live the rest of his life knowing he had been too cowardly and weak to do anything as a girl was hurt right in front of him, but it was not so. Potter released a furious flurry of blows against her attackers the likes of which Neville would have imagined coming from jungle animal. He watched without comprehending as the small girl of maybe four and a half feet laid waste to the hulking ogres that were Malfoy's thugs.

But she was not finished there! Potter bodily dragged Malfoy into the brawl with a punch to the jaw Neville felt an ache in sympathy for him. She whaled on Malfoy like a bear mauling its dinner.

"I warned you, Malfoy," she had hissed when she had him in a hold of submission. "Did you think I was kidding?"

Neville hadn't thought she was kidding, but he hadn't expected her to follow through with her words in such a shocking way. Judging by the looks on the other Slytherin first-years faces, they hadn't been expecting it either.

"Psychotic bint!" Malfoy snarled, renewing his struggle.

Neville might have felt honour-bound to challenge the blond boy to a duel for such an insult to a lady if it hadn't been for the fact that Potter flung him down like he was something dirtying her hands and all but stomped on his privates in retaliation. As the idiotic boy keened, Neville felt that sympathy ache again.

The confrontation ended with Malfoy admitting defeat and returning the Remembrall. Potter returned to her normal self after advising the other Slytherins in how to lessen Malfoy's suffering and
walked off *like a boss* with Neville trailing behind her.

Neville Longbottom didn't so much believe in gods as he did natural forces in the world far out of his control, but at the moment pretty Heri Potter handed him his precious possession with a sweet smile on her face, Neville became the high priest of a new religion with her as the supreme goddess.

The Slytherins that had witnessed the beat-down Heri had given Malfoy and his meatheads edged around her as if she were a ticking bomb for weeks. She ignored it pointedly. (Honestly, could they be any more obvious? They were supposed to be the crafty ones!) She made no mention of the incident since and had re-assumed what she now considered her school persona. When asked about it by her friends, Heri claimed ignorance. For the most part, no one tried to confront her about it.

It was only 'for the most part' since Malfoy had made it his life's ambition to get her in trouble in whatever ways he could manage. He didn't succeed, of course — none of professors took him seriously because of how non-confrontational Heri came off as, nor would any of his housemate back him up after the first time when Heri put the fear of God in them.

"What do you mean you're staying out of it?" Malfoy had snapped at Theodore Nott when the gangling boy refused to help. Nott was the only person Malfoy talked to as an equal. "You're just going to stand there while a Hufflepuff makes fools out of us?"

Nott sent Malfoy an unimpressed look.

"You mean make a fool out of you. I'm not putting myself on the line just because you don't know when to admit you're beat. I like to live my life *without* injury."

"When my father hears about this—!"

"By all means, Draco!" Nott interrupted. "Tell your father how a Hufflepuff girl younger than you and half your size sent you limping to the Hospital Wing! Tell him how she had you flat on your back and wandless in less than a minute! I'm sure he'd love to hear all about it!"

Malfoy fumed but conceded the point, not willing to humiliate himself by letting his father know how badly he'd been beaten. Since then, he spent a significant amount of his time glaring at her from across the room while plotting his next petty attempt to trouble her.

In contrast to the hedging of the first-years, the older snakes seemed to have joined her fan-club. It obviously baffled those not in the know when an older Slytherin would shake her hand or clap her affably on the back, but they seemed to have chalked it up to Heri being on good terms with the three scariest boys on the Slytherin Quidditch team.

Marcus, Lucian, and Graham had laughed themselves sick when they heard about how she had whaled on the other first-years.

"His face was always begging for a beating, in my opinion," Lucian chortled.

Marcus patted her head fondly, still guffawing.

"Didn't know you had it in you, twerp! They had to levitate that Goyle kid out; he was clocked out proper for two hours!"

Heri took advantage of her new popularity in the sketchiest House by finagling the password to their common room out of them. Heri found that she could get the bit of peaceful solitude she'd been craving since she arrived at school by telling her Housemates that she was going to go visit Marcus
in the Slytherin common room. Not even Megan, Wayne, or Hannah would trail after her then. She would then enjoy a leisurely stroll by herself until she got to see her favourite person at Hogwarts; the situation was made of win.

It turned out that punching a Bludger with your bare fist was a feat that impressed even Gryffindors. After word had spread that Heri had saved Justin Finch-Fletchley from bodily harm during their Flying lesson, the Weasley twins came poking around to get a closer look at Heri. That was not to say that the Beaters from the other House teams didn't come around to get a grasp on the challenge she might give them in the future as well, but the Weasley twins were the only ones that literally poked her.

"Look at these wee twigs, Georgie," said twin number one. He jabbed at a bicep. "Hard to believe this is the arm that knocked a Bludger straight into space!"

They were at the Quidditch pitch. The Hufflepuff House team had coerced Heri into sitting in for a practice to show her what fun could be had if she joined the team next year. They had entered the pitch as the Gryffindors were finishing up, and the twins had introduced themselves to Heri and her entourage after they had changed back into their regular uniforms.

"Ah, but good things come in small packages, Freddie, my lad," said twin number two, nodding sagely. "Why, she could likely pick up Hagrid and cradle him like a baby if she used both arms!"

Heri couldn't help but laugh, smothering the sound behind one of her hands. She rolled her eyes as they winked cheekily at her.

"First of all, I'm left-handed," said Heri waving the hand of the arm Fred hadn't been prodding. "Second, I certainly did not send it into space — it flew off just the same as if I had hit it with a bat. Really, the exaggerations are incredible!"

George Weasley plopped down next to her indolently.

"Here now, the truth sounds incredible enough!"

"Here, here!" Fred chimed in, mimicking George's pose in her other side. "A little Miss like you batting up a Bludger properly would be amazing enough—"

"—managing the same with a punch is one for the history books!" George finished.

They continued on in this vein, discussing the oddity of the occurrence. Every once in a while a member of the Hufflepuff team would shoot them a cautious look, as if they were expecting the Weasley boys to somehow abduct Heri and turn her into a Gryffindor to join their team instead.

As they chatted, Heri would point out the Snitch whenever she saw it, sometimes locating it before the team Seeker did. She, of course, could have pin-pointed it even more often if she had been paying active attention to it — what with her raptor vision — but she didn't want that Diggory boy to feel bad.

"The strength of an ogre and the eyes of a harpy!" Fred proclaimed, tugging on a curl of her hair teasingly. "If only you were a Gryffindor! We've been searching for a decent Seeker, you know."

"Now, now, we don't want to go tipping off the competition, do we?" George reprimanded with a finger waggle. "Now that Potter's in their pocket, we'll need all the advantage we can get!"

Heri snorted.
"Really, you two. I won't be on the team until next year if ever. There's no guarantee I'll get a spot, nor am I sure I even want to join anyway."

"Not join the Quidditch team!" cried everyone who had heard Heri's statement.

George leaned in.

"Why wouldn't you want to join? It's loads of fun!"

Heri shot them an unimpressed look.

"It's dangerous, isn't it? I don't know if I want to risk life and limb for a game."

"Rubbish!" interjected Ernie. He had been following the conversation avidly. "Quidditch is the best! Sure, there's the risk of getting a bit dinged up, but that's nothing a few minutes in the Hospital Wing can't cure!"

They proceeded to pelt Heri with various reasons why she absolutely had to join the team.

"Alright, alright!" she eventually exclaimed. "If there's a spot open, I'll try out next year. Happy?"

There was an absurd amount of cheering in response.

Heri sat in a puddle of blood, flecks of gore splattered across her front. A primitive club almost the length of her and as thick at the handle as her waist was held loosely on her lap. It was dripping with blood and staining her skirt. Her heart was racing a mile a minute as she took in the sight of the towering monster she had just clobbered.

Why wasn't it exploding into dust? This was the hysterical question Heri's fevered mind kept asking. All the other monsters she had destroyed immediately turned to ash! This was the first time she had dealt with an actual corpse!

This was the first time she was soaked in blood.

Oh, gods, she had a corpse on her hands! There was a dead carcass just laying in the corridor! How was she going to fix this?! She didn't know how to dispose of a body! Would they expel her when they found her? Would she be sent to jail?!

Tears of terror and panic streamed down her cheeks.

What the Hell was she supposed to do now?!

"MISS POTTER!" a horrified voice rang out, turning Heri's head.

There, at the turn of the corridor, were a trio of professors, McGonagall, Snape, and Quirrell.

Quirrell let out a yelp at the grisly sight and fainted dead away. The remaining two, being of stronger dispositions, quickly hustled over to where Heri sat trembling at the withdrawal of adrenaline and sobbing with fright.

McGonagall pulled Heri out of the cooling blood and drew her into a comforting embrace. She checked Heri over discreetly and was relieved to find nothing worse than bruising.

As McGonagall did her best to calm Heri, Snape inspected the beast. He frowned harshly.
"What in Merlin's name happened here?"

"Really, Severus!" McGonagall scolded. "Give the poor girl a moment!"

"I-i-i-it . . ." Heri stammered, her eyes bleary with tears. Wasn't she in mountains of trouble? "I w-was ju-st . . ."

McGonagall shushed her.

"Hush now, dearie. Take a deep breath."

Heri sucked in a shuddering breath and held it. After a few seconds, she released it slowly. She did this a couple times more before her trembling stopped.

Alright, so they weren't angry at her — she could turn this in her favour.

"Isn't that better?" the transfiguration professor soothed. "Are you ready to tell us what happened?"

Heri nodded hesitantly.

"I was coming down from the owlery, Professor. I was headed back down to the dorms. That— that . . . whatever that thing is ran right into me when I turned the corner. It tried to kill me! It tried to hit me with that—that—" Heri waved her arm sharply at the fallen club. "I tried to run but it caught me and it picked me up and I was so scared and—!"

"Ms. Potter!" said McGonagall, cutting off Heri's increasingly raising voice with a little shake. "It's alright now. It can't hurt you anymore. However did it come to die in such way?"

Heri shot the body a wild-eyed look.

"I was kicking and scratching and trying to make it let go but nothing worked, not even when I hit it with spells! It was swinging it's club at me and I was— I was pulling myself out of the way, and I didn't know what to do, professor! I thought I was going to die!"

"How did it die, Potter?" Snape said in his dark tone.

Heri let all of her anxiety and confusion lace her words.

"It got me in the side when I moved too slow, sir. I don't know how I did it but I managed to get the bat thingy out of it's hand and I whacked it as hard as I could! I think I hit it in the head. It dropped me but it almost landed me as well, so I just kept whacking at it until it stopped moving."

The two conscious professor looked to the weapon in question. It was almost the size of the girl that had used it! As if to validate the truth of what Heri said, Snape identified what he knew to be brain matter and shards of bone embedded into the club.

"You . . ." McGonagall couldn't have been more gobsmacked if someone had slapped her with a fish. "You lifted that heavy thing and bludgeoned the troll to death?"

Heri flinched at the blunt words. She nodded warily.

"I . . . I've always been rather strong for my size, ma'am."

Snape and McGonagall looked at each other blankly. 'Strong for her size' was an understatement!
Snape dragged the glistening weapon from where it lay when Heri had dropped it. He offered the handle to Heri purposefully when she did little more than stare at it. Now that she was coming down from her battle high, she had to use two hands, but she hefted the club up as if she were lifting a stack of textbooks.

There were no words to describe the expressions on the professors faces.

"A fine mess," Snape muttered. He gave Heri a hard, searching look. "Why were you not in the Great Hall, girl? I have never known a student who would rather spend time in the owlery instead of fattening themselves up at the Halloween Feast."

Heri looked at her bloodied hands.

"Hagrid told me that . . . that my-my parents died on Halloween. I didn't really feel like celebrating, sir."

They spent no further time on questioning Heri.

As Snape proceeded to revive Quirrell to help him with the clean up, McGonagall ushered Heri away from the scene.

"To the Hospital Wing with you," the older woman said. "No doubt a Calming Draught will do you a bit of good."

They had planned on keeping the incident hushed up. They didn't account for three Gryffindors, the Weasley twins' younger brother, Neville, and the Granger girl to come across them while running about the halls when they should have been in their dormitories. Their screams at seeing Heri looking like the body from a murder-mystery could be heard halfway across the building. The story was all over the school by the next morning.

Christmas came and passed in a far more pleasant manner than Heri had ever experienced.

The legend of the Girl Who Lived had again caught fire since 'the Trouncing of the Troll,' as the incident had come to be known. The story became comparable to the extraordinary feats of the first Hercules by the time letters were being sent home about it. In the month and a half before winter-break, Heri had zero time to just kick back, hounded as she was. Luckily, the majority of her groupies went home for the holidays. She spent two blissful weeks lazing about the first-year dorms, only going out for meals and the occasional stroll around the grounds.

All four of the Weasley boys remained at the school. Heri heard from Fred and George that their parents were off to see one of their older brothers in Romania. Charlie Weasley worked on a dragon reserve and didn't have the resources to visit for the holidays, so Mr. and Mrs. Weasley went to him instead, bringing along their youngest as well.

Heri was introduced to Percy and Ron — the twins' older and younger brother respectively — during the feast on Christmas day. She had come down in the lovely new jumper the twins had gotten their mother to knit for her and greeted the remaining students and teachers cordially.

"You got a jumper too?" blurted Ron, staring disbelievingly at the black knitted top with a prettily stylised yellow 'H' on the front. Apparently, he recognised his mother's knitting style. He himself was wearing a maroon one with an 'R' on it.

Heri smoothed down the front. It was a bit long on her, obviously made by a person used to outfitting bigger people. It came down to her thighs, draped over her fingers, and slipped off one of
her shoulders, but it was professionally done as well as being warm and lovely. It was the sweetest thing she had ever received and she was grateful for it.

"It was in the pile along with my other presents," said Heri, sitting down at the table. And hadn't that been a shock? Christmas presents! She had gotten sweets from all of her Housemates that she spoke to regularly as well as from other Houses as well. "You must thank your mother for me — no one's ever made me a jumper before."

Ron flushed a bright red.

"Don't know what she's doing, sending you a Weasley jumper," he mumbled into his peas.

"I'm sorry . . ." she said slowly, tapping her bottom lip with her spoon, a furrow of concern knotting her at her eyebrows. "Did I put her through any trouble? Fred and George said they asked your mother to . . ."

Ron shook his head vigorously.

"That's not it at all!" he exclaimed loudly, turning into a proper tomato when heads turned in his directions. "It's just," he continued, in a quieter voice, "y'know, I just thought she sent it with no warning or something like that. I wouldn't put it passed Mum to send a jumper to stranger just because she felt like it."

Heri tittered at the thought, trying to imagine Aunt Petunia doing something similar but failing.

"She must be awfully generous then," she concluded. "You're lucky to have such a nice mum."

After eating, the twins introduced her to the joys of wizarding chess wherein she soundly beat them both. She whooped their behinds two more times before they admitted defeat and pushed Ron forward to battle in their place. Ron was the best chess player in the family they bragged, he would surely give her a run for her money. Heri and Ron fought it out for the better part of an hour before they agreed to a tie for the sake of going out to play in the snow instead.

Later on, after she returned to her dorm for an afternoon nap, Hedwig flew in with another present for her. Heri hadn't seen the dratted bird since winter had reared it's chilly head so it was quite a surprise.

"Hello, Your Eminence. What have you got there?"

It turned out to be a cloak that made the wearer invisible.

Heri wasn't sure what to do. She was sprinting down the dungeon corridors toward the Slytherin common room. Her breath came out in pants, her lungs burned in exhaustion, her legs ached with exertion. She all but flew to her destination, hair streaming behind her, clothes rippling at her speed.

She needed Marcus! She needed someone to tell her what the hell she had to do to salvage the situation.

Earlier that week, during one of the teas she took with Hagrid after classes, she had witnessed a dragon being hatched. Where had Hagrid gotten a hold of a dragon egg? What was he thinking, trying to bring up a dragon in a wooden hut? What was he going to do with it when it got bigger?

She had devoted extra time to help Hagrid with his new bundle of scaly joy. After classes, she would help Hagrid by looking after little Norbert while he took care of his grounds-keeper duties.
Her ability to speak to reptilian creatures came in handy as they had discovered that her hissed words calmed the young dragon. Norbert wasn't anywhere near old enough to communicate yet, but he responded well to stories and Heri holding him while she fed him the concoction Hagrid made specifically to nourish baby dragons.

They had been managing well enough until the day of moving Norbert came up. He was growing at a steady rate, already the size of a medium-sized dog and promised to grow larger even sooner. Hagrid had been distraught at the thought of being separated from his baby, but he couldn't deny that he soon wouldn't have the resources to care for Norbert — he didn't have enough space and nowhere near enough food.

They had been discussing their options when Hagrid noticed a face in his window.

It was Malfoy!

The blond ponce had skedaddled when he realised he was discovered, but that didn't take away from the fact that he knew they had a dragon. Heri and Hagrid had sat in dread, waiting for the inquisition to drop the hammer on them. But it never came. Two, three days later, still nothing. For whatever reason, Malfoy had kept the information to himself.

Malfoy's silence didn't stop the two from frantically trying to come up with a plan. Heri had been headed down to see Hagrid again when she saw Malfoy strutting down the hall. A wicked smirk alighted on his face when he saw her before he turned deliberately and walked off with purpose. Even not knowing where he was going, a puddle of dread pooled in her belly. Her instincts screamed at her that trouble was coming and she had took off like her rear had been set on fire.

She burst into the Slytherin common room and streaked her way up to the boys' dorms when she saw neither Marcus nor his friends were there. She pounded on the door vigorously and all but tackled Lucian when he opened it.

"What the bloody fuck?" Lucian cried, windmilling his arms to stay on his feet.

Graham and Marcus looked on curiously from where they were playing cards on Lucian's bed.

"Help, please!" Heri cried, gripping at Lucian's shirt. "Malfoy's going to ruin everything!"

"What could Malfoy possibly do that you can't take care of yourself?" asked Marcus, unimpressed.

"If it was just about me, I'd pound his soddin' face into the dirt until his blood turned as muddy as he says the muggleborns' are!" Heri snarled, halfway into the state of mind that had her cursing like a sailor and thrashing whoever stood in front of her. Angry tears prickled the corners of her eyes.

"But Hagrid is in trouble! That buggerin' ponce is going to get Hagrid fired!"

At receiving their full attention, Heri went on to explain about the dragon.

Marcus certainly didn't care anything about Hagrid, but Heri's tears of frustration brought on the panic most guys felt when a girl started crying on them. To make her stop, He hurriedly suggested going to the Weasleys since they knew from Heri that Charlie Weasley worked with dragons.

Heri's face lit up like the sun and she quickly gave them her thanks before rushing off to find the twins.

Fred and George ended up being an immense help. They had a map of the school that showed the movements of the people within the castle and grounds. They found Malfoy meeting up with his
goons before the three of them headed in the direction of Snape's office. Cobbling together a plan involving a lullaby, Heri's invisibility cloak, jinx'd staircases, and a transfigured rubber duck, Heri and the twins rushed off to put their plan into action.

While Fred and George went off to slow the enemy down by rigging up the stairs leading down from the floor Malfoy was on, Heri hurried back to Hagrid's to inform him of the plan. She gave him the rubber duck to transfigure while she convinced Norbert to take a nap.

Norbert couldn't understand much yet but he appreciated a song before bed all the same. She eased him into a deep sleep and placed him in a cushioned crate which she then wrapped with her invisibility cloak. By the time she was ready to go hide Norbert in a secret room in the boathouse, Hagrid had an animated komodo dragon lazing by the fire — it was approximately the same size and proportions of Norbert.

"That looks great!" said Heri. "Maybe you should give it frills too, like some lizards have. We could say Malfoy mistook them for wings."

Hagrid thought it was a brilliant idea and did just so, displaying his magical prowess once again. Only a third-year's education or not, Hagrid knew what he was doing.

Heri discreetly pointed her wand at Norbert's crate through the gap of her uniform cloak, placing a levitation charm on it. She nodded to Hagrid before making her way to the boathouse, her pace brisk but not suspicious.

She had just placed Norbert in the hidey-hole when she heard echoes of what she knew were Malfoy's shrieking. Heart pumping faster, Heri jogged back onto the grounds and back to Hagrid's.

The two of them made a production of playing with the komodo dragon/frill-necked lizard hybrid. They had a good ten minutes of calming down and mentally preparing themselves that — by the Malfoy and whomever else he dragged in to bust Hagrid came to the door — they really were just faffing around, having fun with the dragon-like creature.

Malfoy, Professors Snape and Sprout, as well as Fred and George were at the door. Malfoy looked triumphant, the professors looked agitated and bewildered respectively, and the twins were anxious as well as wincing in pain from the unforgiving hands of Snape's twisting their ears and dragging them along.

Hagrid greeted them with a look of polite confusion on his face.

"Was there summat you needed, professors?"

"Don't even bother pretending," Malfoy jeered. "I know that dragon is in here!"

Hagrid gave Malfoy a blank once-over before returning his gaze to the professors.

"Hold your tongue, Mr. Malfoy," Snape instructed, releasing his grip from Fred and George's ears. He gave Hagrid a flat look. "We've been informed that you are currently housing a dragon."

Hagrid grinned brightly.

"Aye, I am! You lot want ter come in an' see 'em then?"

Those not a part of the plot looked astounded. They were speechless as Hagrid ushered them in and offered them tea.
"He's jus' woke from a nap so he's still a bit sluggish."

Heri looked up from where she was tickling the big lizard behind its frills and smiled pleasantly. They had named the reptile Enoch. Enoch blinked blearily up at the guests before closing its eyes again and hissing softly in pleasure.

"What in Merlin's name is that?" asked Professor Sprout, eyeing the lizard in bemusement.

"Enoch's a muggle dragon!" said Hagrid excitedly, serving up the tea. "Heri was tellin' me about how Muggles had a species of dragon still living amongst 'em tha' wasn't part of the lot we included in the Statute. They're a lot smaller'n regular dragons, but I reckon tha's why they were considered safe enough to leave with the Muggles."

Eyes swung to Heri at such an outlandish claim. She shrugged helplessly and petted Enoch on his snout.

"They're called komodo dragons," she explained. "I'm pretty sure they're not at all magical. I've read that they're called 'dragons' because they're the biggest species of lizard known to Muggles. Muggles call large lizards dragons, you know."

"That creature certainly doesn't look like any komodo dragon I've ever seen before," said Snape, eyeing Enoch's frills.

"Ah, well, Hagrid won an egg off of a chap he met who said it was a dragon egg, sir. Looking at Enoch now, I'd say he's some sort of hybrid between a komodo and a frill-necked lizard."

"That's not the dragon I saw!" Malfoy exclaimed, pointing an accusing finger at the indolent lizard. He had been growing progressively redder the longer the conversation went along, but he had finally reached his bursting point. "I don't know what they did with it, but it had wings and coughed smoke!"

Hagrid and Heri looked at each other in feigned confusion.

"Were you peeking through the windows or something, Malfoy?" said Heri, making a disapproving face. "If you were being creepy and invading Hagrid's privacy by looking through those hazy windows, I don't doubt that you would have thought you saw Enoch with wings."

The situation immediately turned against Malfoy's favour. Heri had never seen Professor Sprout look so shocked and appalled.

Later on, after Malfoy had been pinned with a month's worth of detention for disrespecting a staff member and trying to get another student expelled through outrageous lies, Heri introduced Norbert to his new temporary playmate. The twins had assured Hagrid that they would get in touch with their brother Charlie to get Norbert to a good home, so Norbert only had maybe another week left at Hogwarts. Hagrid was saddened but the fact that Enoch would still be around brightened his mood; he was surprisingly fond of the creature.

Out of all the people at Hogwarts, Heri hadn't been expecting Quirrell to be the one to abduct her and drag her off to parts unknown. If she had to make a list of things from the school she thought most likely to do her harm, the stuttery DADA professor was near the bottom of the list, above under-cooked meat but below her own pillow.

Well, perhaps 'abducted' was too strong of a word, Heri thought as she was dropped in front of a dusty mirror. She wasn't abducted so much as she was deceived into following him into his office.
where he then proceeded to body-bind her and levitate her through the corridor Professor Dumbledore had specifically forbidden at the beginning of the year.

She wasn't sure what the big deal about the corridor was, either. The cerberus was wicked for shock purposes, but any eight-year-old from her primary school could have told you that they were put to sleep with a bit of music. After the dog, it was all decidedly not deadly challenges that they went through to reach the dusty room they were now in.

Why they hell were they there? The room was empty beside the old mirror! Oh, gods, he wasn't some child-molester with a fetish for watching himself at it, was he?

"I suppose you were expecting Severus, weren't you?" Quirrell laughed, and it wasn't his usual quivering treble either, but cold and sharp. "Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an over-grown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?"

Heri blinked up at the man talking to himself.

"Excuse me?" Was he asking if she had expected Professor Snape to be a paedophile? "Professor Snape's scarier than the national debt, but he's nowhere near the type, sir."

Quirrell sneered at her.

"Many would disagree with you."

Quirrell snapped his fingers. Ropes sprang out of thin air and wrapped themselves tightly around Heri.

"You're too nosy to live, Potter. Scurrying around the school on Halloween like that, for all I knew you'd seen me coming to look at what was guarding the Stone."

"You let the troll in, sir?"

Hard to believe when he fainted at the sight of it . . .

But what stone was he talking about and why was it being guarded?

"Certainly. I have a special gift with trolls — you must have seen what I did to the one in the chamber back there? Unfortunately, while everyone else was running around looking for it, Snape, who already suspected me, went straight to the third floor to head me off — and not only did my troll fail to beat you to death, that three-headed dog didn't even manage to bite Snape's leg off properly."

Well, that explained the limp Heri had noticed. She had thought it was the result of a prank gone wrong.

"Now, wait quietly, Potter. I need to examine this interesting mirror."

Again with the mirror. What the hell could a mirror do, especially one that looked old enough to fart dust? At least Quirrell was turning out to be a homicidal thief instead of a kiddy-toucher; she could forgive larceny, being a pervert was unforgivable.

"This mirror is the key to finding the Stone," Quirrell murmured, tapping his way around the frame with his wand. "Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this . . . but he's in London . . . I'll be far away by the time he gets back . . ."
Well, she didn't know the headmaster very well, but Heri felt that she owed enough to him as another person to try to prevent his property from being stolen. Unfortunately, she was a bit tied up at the moment and didn't have enough slack to do more than wiggle her fingers. All Heri could think of doing was to keep Quirrell talking and stop him from concentrating on the mirror.

"I saw Professor Snape follow you into the Forest once!" said Heri, recalling an instance when she had looked out a window and saw the pair going into the Forbidden Forest. "He looked dreadfully upset with you, sir."

"Yes," said Quirrell idly, walking around the mirror to look at the back. "He was on to me by that time, trying to find out how far I'd got. He suspected me all along. Tried to frighten me — as though he could, when I had Lord Voldemort on my side. . . ."

Gods above! Voldemort? When did he enter the situation? Heri's heart began to pump faster. Her current predicament was proving to be more dire than she had originally thought.

Quirrell came back out from behind the mirror and stared hungrily into it.

"I see the Stone . . . I'm presenting it to my master . . . but where is it?"

Harry struggled against the ropes binding her despite the fact that she knew they wouldn't give. If Voldemort was the one that was after whatever stone Quirrell was trying to get at, it meant nothing good for anyone else. Alas, all she could do was keep Quirrell from giving his whole attention to the mirror.

"Professor Snape has always seemed to have something against me," commented Heri. If only she could get at her box-cutter! She kept it with her always, tucked into a hidden pocket she had sewn into her school skirts. "I never understood it since I don't remember doing anything to deserve resentment."

"Oh, he does," said Quirrell casually. "Heavens, yes. He was at Hogwarts with your father, didn't you know? They loathed each other."

Heri certainly hadn't known that. She supposed that explained it; Professor Snape did seem like the type to hold grudges.

"I heard you a few days ago, sobbing — I thought Professor Snape was threatening you, sir — he's the one you argue with the most."

For the first time, a spasm of fear flitted across Quirrell's face.

"Sometimes," he said, "I find it hard to follow my master's instructions — he is a great wizard and I am weak —"

Heri gasped.

"You mean he was there in the classroom with you?!"

By the gods, how had he managed to get on the grounds? The school was supposed to have the strongest wards in Britain!

"He is with me wherever I go," said Quirrell quietly. "I met him when I travelled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it . . . Since then, I have served him faithfully, although I have let him down many times. He has
had to be very hard on me."

Quirrell shivered suddenly.

"He does not forgive mistakes easily. When I failed to steal the Stone from Gringotts, he was most displeased. He punished me . . . decided he would have to keep a closer watch on me . . ."

Quirrell's voice trailed away. Then he cursed under his breath.

"I don't understand . . . is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?"

Oh, yes, that's a good idea: destroy the container of the thing you're after. That'll get you what you want. Heri silently rooted for Quirrell to decide to go the way of destruction just so she could laugh at him later.

What was looking in a mirror going to do for him anyway? Was it enchanted somehow? If filthy and hidden away was how all enchanted mirrors were kept, Heri would be severely disappointed. Still, she wanted to know what the big deal was. Maybe she should try looking in it like Quirrell was doing?

Heri tried to edge to the left, trying to get in front of the glass without Quirrell noticing, but the ropes around her ankles were too tight — she tripped and fell over.

Damnation!

Quirrell ignored her. He was still talking to himself.

"What does this mirror do? How does it work? Help me, Master!"

To Heri's amazement, a voice answered, and the voice seemed to come from Quirrell himself.

"Use the girl . . . Use the girl . . ."

Quirrell rounded on Heri.

"Yes — Potter — come here."

He clapped his hands once, and the ropes binding Heri fell off.

Heri got slowly to her feet. She would have made a run for it if it hadn't been for the flames that blocked the way on the other side of the door.

"Come here," Quirrell repeated. "Look in the mirror and tell me what you see."

Obviously, seeing into the mirror was some key part of the insane process. With luck, she'd be as unsuccessful as Quirrell.

Quirrell pushed her forward and moved close behind her.

Heri breathed in the funny smell that seemed to come from Quirrell's turban. She saw her reflection, ruffled and bewildered at first. A moment later, the reflection smiled at her. It put its hand into the pocket Heri had made and pulled out a blood-red stone. It winked and put the stone back. As it did so, Heri felt something heavy drop into her real pocket. Somehow — incredibly — she'd gotten the stone.

That was just her luck. What the bloody hell was she supposed to do with it?
"Well?" said Quirrell impatiently. "What do you see?"

Time to lie for Queen and Country. Harry shoved aside her hatred for falsehood and girded up all her audacity.

"I see myself shaking hands with Professor Dumbledore," she invented hurriedly. "I — I've won the House Cup for Hufflepuff, sir."

Quirrell cursed again.

What followed was the most horrifying thing Heri had ever experienced. The disembodied voice called her out on her lie and was then revealed to be Voldemort himself hitching a ride on the back of Quirrell's head like a flesh-eating parasite. He was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake. There was some definite rotting going on at the edge of Voldemort's face where it met the rest of Quirrell's head. He must have been the funk coming from Quirrell's turban.

Gag.

"Mere shadow and vapour . . ." the ghastly wraith hissed. "I have form only when I can share another's body . . . but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds . . . Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks . . . and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own . . ."

Not that Heri was complaining, but why did they keep informing her of every horrible thing they had done to get to this point? They obviously thought they were going to get away with it, but why were they chancing it by giving Heri a step-by-step outline of all their criminal activity? They might as well give her a hand-written time-line.

"Now . . ." Voldemort finally said. His eyes narrowed. "Why don't you give me that Stone in your pocket?"

Oh, bugger! She thought they hadn't realised. She stumbled backwards in alarm.

"Don't be a fool," snarled the face. "Better save your own life and join me . . . or you'll meet the same end as your parents . . . They died begging me for mercy . . ."

Fury filled her.

"LIAR!" Heri shouted. Her polite veneer evaporated into ash.

How dare he lie to her?! She remembered far back enough to know that neither of her parents gave any hint of pleading with that monster!

Voldemort made more false statements. He tried to pander to her ego while also guilting her into giving up. Too bad for him that the more he talked, the angrier Heri got.

"Your mother needn't have died . . . she was trying to protect you . . . Now give me the Stone, unless you want her to have died in vain."

Heri trembled in rage.

"NEVER!"

If he wanted the stupid rock, he'd have to pry it from her cold, dead hands!

Heri sprang toward the flaming doorway — if she was quick enough, she'd get away with
minimal burning.

Voldemort screamed, "SEIZE HER!" and the next second, Heri felt Quirrell's hand close around her wrist. At once, a needle-sharp pain seared across Heri's scar. Her head felt as though it was about to split in two! She screamed, struggling with all her might, and to her surprise, Quirrell let go of her.

The pain in her head lessened. She looked around wildly to see where Quirrell had gone, and saw him hunched in pain, looking at his fingers — they were blistering before his eyes.

"Seize her! SEIZE HER!" shrieked Voldemort again, and Quirrell lunged, knocking Heri clean off her feet, landing on top of her, both hands around Heri's neck. Heri's scar was almost blinding her with pain, yet she could see Quirrell howling in agony.

"Master, I cannot hold her — my hands — my hands!" Quirrell — though pinning Heri to the ground with his knees — let go of her neck and stared, bewildered, at his own palms. Heri could see they looked burned, raw, and shiny.

"Then kill her, fool, and be done!" screeched Voldemort.

Heri saw red. Kill her? KILL HER?! SHE'D KILL THEM FIRST!

Quirrell raised his hand to perform a deadly curse, but Heri — by instinct — reached up and grabbed Quirrell's face.

"AAAARGH!"

Quirrell rolled off her, his face blistering.


Pressing her advantage, Heri jumped to her feet, and caught Quirrell by the arm. Quirrell screamed and tried to throw Heri off but she put her abnormal strength to use and dragged him across the floor as he writhed. She pushed back the pain in her head and focused on the task at hand.

She heaved the howling man halfway up and threw him into the mirror with a resounding crash. Shards of glass came off embedded into his back. A thick shard gouged into Voldemort's eye. The wraith was screeching now.

"KILL HER! KILL HER!"

Heri snatched up a long, jagged shard and brought it down on Quirrell's front again and again. Her other hand was wrapped around Quirrell's forearm and the man convulsed, trying to jerk away from both attacks but having nowhere to go. Stab after stab, Heri brought down the sharp glass with as much force and speed she could muster.

By the gods, the pain in her head was staggering! Heri's head swam and her vision faded in and out as she relentlessly brought her weapon down on her foe. No, no, she wouldn't die here! Not by this wretched creature! But she found that her arms grew increasingly heavy; her muscles ached and her lungs burned. She didn't want to die there, but there was nothing she could do to put off the descent of her eye-lids.

Heri's bloodied fingers released their grip on her fragment of glass and she fell into the depths of blackness, down . . . down . . . down . . .
Albus Dumbledore wasn't certain how he felt about Heri Potter. On one hand, she was a sweet girl that got along with students of every House, did well in her classes, and was the darling of the faculty, Severus included though he wouldn't admit it. On the other hand, her Sorting had been a surprise, and she was turning out quite a bit differently than he had expected. A person was bound to surprise you every once and a while, true, but Heri was nothing like Albus had thought she would be.

He hadn't thought that a child of James and Lily Potter would be capable of quiet, not with how both of them were bold and fierce in their convictions, unbothered with letting other people know their thoughts. And yet Heri Potter was a very quiet girl, always willing to lend an ear to anyone that wanted to fill the air, and never did she volunteer to demonstrate anything in class. Soft-spoken, Pomona had told him. Heri was warm smiles and carefully worded statements in place of her parents' glowing grins and forthright declarations.

She wasn't the adventurous sort either. She showed no interest in the third floor corridor, not even after receiving the Invisibility Cloak. Albus had been so certain than no child would pass up the opportunity to get up to mischief at the chance of being invisible, but he was proven wrong. As far as he knew, Heri hadn't done more than carry it around with her; she hadn't even offered to lend it to the Weasley twins to assist them in their pranking.

She showed so much potential though!

Albus had overheard students talking about the occasion wherein Heri had rescued another student by actually punching a Bludger away. Then there was the mess on Halloween where she had physically beaten a fully grown Mountain Troll to death with its own club. Such physically-focused subconscious magic was astounding. He did feel dreadful that such a young girl had been forced to take a life — even if it was a troll's life — and in such a violent manner as well. He couldn't help but feel proud of her as she gamely made herself move on from the situation, especially when her friends took the opportunity to bring it up whenever they could. She certainly had the makings of a hero within her.

When Albus had arrived at the chamber of the Mirror of Erised that evening, he wasn't certain what had happened. Outside of the casual destruction Quirrell had wrought on his way through the obstacles, there had been no signs of struggle. That, of course, could be attributed to a simple 'mobilicorpus' or perhaps he had stunned Heri before levitating her through. That didn't account for the shattered Mirror and horrendous bloodbath though.

Catching sight of the damage, Albus swore his heart skipped a beat. The girl was soaked through with blood! For a horrible moment, he was certain she was dead. His horror was abated when he discerned the movements of breathing coming from her. He rushed over to get a handle on the damage.

Glass was everywhere — on the floor, slicing into Quirrell's corpse, and even on Heri. There was a nasty gouge in her hand from where it appeared that a piece of glass had been shoved into her palm.

Albus feared the worst and quickly performed rudimentary healing spells on her, breathing a sigh of relief a moment later when he checked her pulse and found it to be steady. That she was still going strong — relatively — after clearly surviving some kind of atrocious attack was a credit to her.

Carrying Heri to the Hospital Wing, Albus couldn't help but continue to wonder what in the world had happened in that chamber. There was clearly some sort of battle which Heri had clearly won, but the method by which Quirrell had died worried him. The man was half ash, the other half filled with stab wounds. Remembering the strange gouging and slices in Heri's hand, Albus couldn't
help but worry. Had Heri stabbed Quirrell to death? Did she actually have it in her to kill someone, and in such a horrific manner?

Well, that wasn't fair. From what Albus had observed, Heri was nowhere near an aggressive sort. She was the type to strike back only when she was cornered. Thinking on the Bludger and the troll, it was logical to conclude that Heri must somehow fall into a sort of panic-induced frenzy when her life was in danger, doing everything she could to make sure the threat was eliminated. He could hardly fault her for that, many people did the same albeit to a less deadly end.

Looking over the little girl now tucked into the infirmary bed, Albus wondered how the girl would cope once she came to. If she really had stabbed Quirrell, that was a cross she would bear for the rest of her life. She had taken a life, albeit from a person seeking to do the same to her. She was only a child — could she withstand the weight that killing another person brought onto the soul? Only Heri could answer that and she was deeply under with a cocktail of potions to keep her asleep as she healed.

If she held strong, it would be another credit to her name, Albus concluded, stroking his beard in contemplation. Another sign of her potential.
Before Revelation, pt. 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steely green eyes glinted in the late afternoon sun. The cries of agitated birds were like white-noise in an echoing hall, the whips of flapping wings were like a tidal wave washing over a hapless victim. Something gleaming whizzed through the air, finding it's mark in the still-beating heart of an owner to a pair of those thunderous wings.

A cut-off shriek; a violent explosion of dust; then silence.

For three heavy breaths, there was no motion.

As if they were one mind in multiple bodies, a flock of furious birds swarmed into the air, their feathers glinting, their talons like daggers. They converged upon the small form of their prey that dared to cull one of their numbers.

Before the monstrous birds could do any harm, another enemy came upon them, also from the air, taking more of them out before they knew what was happening. In the confusion of the sneak attack, the same blade that pierced the heart of the first beast was slashed through the necks of more.

Under the wounded screams of the dying creatures, uncompromising eyes narrowed.

In a tidy little neighbourhood in southern England, within an upper-middle-class suburb, there was a well-equipped play-park for the use of the general public. In the middle were slides of differing heights, swings built for all ages, two sets of climbing frames, a trio of see-saws, and a roundabout. A bit to the side had a basketball court and tetherball poles. Up on a small hill was a respectable-sized sandpit that doubled as a volley ball court. On the other side of the play equipment was a fenced off tennis court. This park was a popular place for people all over the neighbourhood to come to when they wanted a bit of fresh air.

If one were to take a stroll past the picnic tables on the other side of the swings, they would find a stretch of field used for football and rugby, and a duck pond wherein balls were often tossed in. Sprouting up around the pond were trees that children often dared each other to climb despite their parents' warnings.

It was within one of these trees that a young girl was perched, idly watching the water-fowl milling about in the pond. It was late afternoon, a time other children the girl's age would have been expected to set out for home. Not so for this child; she had escaped the house only hours earlier after finishing her chores and wasn't eager to go trotting back just yet.

At first glance, one would say her wayward hair was black (as black as her soul those that thought badly of her would say). A more thorough look would have a less judgemental person revising their answer — her hair was not black so much as it was an exceedingly dark reddish-brown colour, a colour that resembled Coca-Cola when the drink was held up to the light. She could be called pale, but there was warm pigmentation under her skin that kept her from being called such. Her face was finely structured; her lips were rounded and of a purple-pink colour; her eyes were shaped like almonds and were an oddly deep shade of green. All in all, one would call her an attractive child. That is, ignoring the scar on her forehead, the obstinate clench of her jaw, and the off-putting air she gave off.
Heri Potter observed the frolicking ducks with an expression better suited on a Victorian psychiatric doctor contemplating an in-patient: clinical, nonplussed, with a touch of disgusted fascination. This was not because she was the mad scientist sort nor the abusive Big Brother sort. No, it was because Hedwig was down there in duck form, shamelessly flirting with fowls of both genders, carrying on and thoroughly confusing the other birds.

Heri had been taking to staying out of the house for as long as she could manage since she had returned to Privet Drive for the summer. The Dursleys were amendable to such a plan and didn’t bother her as long as she got her basic chores done every day. A bit of cooking in the morning and evening, some tidying up around the house, the gardening she enjoyed doing anyway, and then she was free to do as she liked. It probably wasn’t the most responsible of the Dursleys to let their niece run as wild as they claimed she was, but ‘not the most responsible’ was exactly the way one would label them.

Heri had taken to long stretches of silence since she got back; not too different from the lack of things she had to say to her relatives before except for the fact that they could now almost feel the weight of those silences. Aunt Petunia had been the most unnerved, she being the one that spent the most time with Heri, and had demanded that Heri stay out of Petunia’s presence as much as Heri could. Considering that Heri couldn’t think any less lowly of her aunt, such a request was not a bother.

She had been feeling conflicted since she had woken up after that horrible evening with Quirrell. On one hand, he had endangered a school full of children, abducted her, tied her up, and eventually tried to kill her. She was well within her rights to defend herself even if it was to the point of offing him. She had absolutely no reason to feel guilty. On the other hand, she didn’t feel guilty, and she wasn’t pretty certain that a normal person would even if there was no reason to.

She was stuck between what was good and what was right.

Heri knew killing Quirrell had been the right thing to do — he had purposefully set a dangerous creature on the school he was supposed to be taking care of, he had tried to steal a powerful artefact and gift it to a genocidal maniac, and he had attacked her with full intention of killing her. Heri was in the right! But she was certain that killing anybody wasn’t what good people did.

Heri tried very hard to be good despite what people said about her, and she was very unhappy that she had fallen to doing something that went against what she strove for. Add on top of that that she wasn’t feeling bad in the least bit about taking Quirrell out, and Heri was wondering if she was just somehow an inherently bad person.

She had always believed that no one was born naturally good or bad, but what if she was wrong and she was bad? Had she been a criminal in a past life and had been reborn with wicked tendencies? The stories said that memories were washed away in the River Lethe, but memories weren’t habits or personality traits, were they? Maybe Heri had been a serial killer that cheated the system somehow to be sent to the Fields of Asphodel instead of the Fields of Punishment and had then gone on to drink from the Lethe to be reincarnated — maybe she was Jack the Ripper, version 2.0.

She had depressed herself into pieces over such thoughts. It was only Hedwig being her flamboyant self that brought Heri any joy lately.

One couldn’t tell at first glance, but if Hedwig was human, she would have been a drag queen. Well — maybe the flamboyantly homosexual best friend that television seemed to believe every girl should have — but definitely a cross-dressing one. There Heri was with her heart almost turning to stone the first time she saw the flesh-eating predator the year before, staring at her with the eyes of a
cannibal, and it turned out the bird was as fruity as a flamingo. It was too big a discrepancy between impressions and Heri had considered the possibility that Hedwig had some sort of multiple-personality disorder.

Heri watched as Hedwig waddled after a harassed looking drake, his wings raised as if he was considering flying away. Hedwig was having nothing of the sort and clamped her beak down on the poor animal's tail-feathers. He honked in alarm and really did take flight, leaving several of his feathers in Hedwig's beak.

Heri snorted when Hedwig looked heavily offended.

"And what exactly did you plan on doing with that duck, Your Eminence? They're not in season, and I don't think you're his type anyway."

Hedwig quacked derisively, as if to say, "What would you know?"

"Well, I'm no expert on the mating habits of ducks, but I think I know enough about men in general to say that if they're literally running away then they're not interested."

"Quack."

"I don't need to know about your worldly experience — I have enough social awareness to know that people trying to flee from you aren't trying to get friendly with you."

"Quack!"

"It doesn't matter if you were going to eat him afterwards, you're still doing it wrong!"

For the third time since Heri came back from school, an argument had broken out at the breakfast table. This time around, Uncle Vernon had been woken in the early hours of the morning by a loud, hooting noise from Heri's room and had been as pleased as he would have been had his dentist declared that he needed all his teeth pulled out.

"Third time this week!" he roared across the table. "If you can't control that owl, it'll have to go!"

As if anyone could control Hedwig or do anything to her that she didn't want!

Heri tried, yet again, to explain.

"She's bored," Heri said with exasperation. "She's used to flying around outside whenever she wants! If I could just let her out at night —"

"Do I look stupid?" snarled Uncle Vernon, a bit of fried egg dangling from his bushy moustache. Hell, yeah, he did. "I know what'll happen if that owl's let out."

He exchanged dark looks with Aunt Petunia.

Heri was ready to tell the lump exactly what would happen if he didn't stop being such a paranoid prick, but her words were drowned out by a long, loud belch from Dudley. She wrinkled her nose at him. Disgusting boy.

"I want more bacon," the smaller lump said.

"There's more in the frying pan, sweetums," said Aunt Petunia, turning misty eyes on her massive son. "We must build you up while we've got the chance." Was the woman blind? Dudley could
literally be rolled down the street. "I don't like the sound of that school food."

"Nonsense, Petunia, I never went hungry when I was at Smeltings," said Uncle Vernon heartily. "Dudley gets enough, don't you, son?"

Dudley, who was so large his bottom drooped over either side of the kitchen chair, grinned and turned to Heri.

"Pass the frying pan."

"You've forgotten the magic word," said Harry irritably. Really, were manners too much to ask for?

The effect of this simple sentence on the rest of the family was incredible: Dudley gasped and fell off his chair with a crash that shook the whole kitchen; Aunt Petunia gave a small scream and clapped her hands to her mouth; Uncle Vernon jumped to his feet, veins throbbing in his temples.

"I meant 'please'!" Heri tacked on when she realised what she had said.

"WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU," thundered his uncle, spraying spit over the table, "ABOUT SAYING THE 'M' WORD IN OUR HOUSE?"

"I —"

"HOW DARE YOU THREATEN DUDLEY!" roared Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his fist.

"I just —"

"I WARNED YOU! I WILL NOT TOLERATE MENTION OF YOUR ABNORMALITY UNDER THIS ROOF!"

Heri had enough. She stood to her feet and roared back, "I'LL GIVE YOU ABNORMALITY, YOU BARKING BASKET-CASE! YOU'RE THE ONE THAT LOSES HIS MIND AT THE MENTION OF ONE LITTLE WORD! I'M THE ONE THAT'S NOT NORMAL? ANYONE ELSE WOULD HAVE YOU COMMITTED!"

Uncle Vernon swelled with indignity, ready to continue his shouting when Heri marched over to the open window, bringing attention to the alarmed neighbour peeking over the fence at them.

"Calm yourself down before we have the police pounding the door in," said Heri, frowning disapprovingly at the nosy woman. "It sounds like you're abusing me in here!"

She punctuated her statement with the slam of the closing window.

Heri stared from her purple-faced uncle to her pale aunt who was trying to heave Dudley to his feet.

"It's one thing to be unaccepting of something," said Heri severely. "It's another thing entirely go completely batty at anything that might have something to do with it. What part of all but ripping your hair out over something supposedly imaginary is normal?"

"I won't have it in this house!" Uncle Vernon insisted again, lowering his tone from the shock of seeing the woman next door listening in.

"Well, maybe if you just ignored my supposedly freaky traits and let Hedwig be outside more
often than she's in her cage, it literally wouldn't be 'in the house'!

He made a low, impatient sound almost like a growl.

"Fine!" the brute of a man snapped. "It stays outside from now on! I don't want to see hide or hair of it in this house ever again!"

Uncle Vernon sat back down, breathing like a winded rhinoceros and watching Heri closely out of the corners of his small, sharp eyes. Overactive toss-pot. Ever since Heri had come home for the summer holidays, he had been treating her like a bomb that might go off at any moment. Honestly, if he wanted to prevent her from going off, nattering on like a nutter wasn't the best way of achieving that.

Heri moved the frying pan from its place on the stove and sat it next to Dudley. The boy flinched but didn't hold himself back from going back to stuffing his face.

"I'm going to my room," Heri said, getting up from the table. "I'll let Hedwig know she's to stay outside."

Heri walked off without another word. She spent a good thirty minutes flinging her box-cutter at the dartboard before she calmed down enough to do more of her summer-reading.

"So, you're telling me," said Heri, watching the strange creature with her arms crossed, "that someone is out to kill me again and that you believe I'll be safer staying here?"

"Yes, Miss!" the thing, Dobby the house-elf, squeaked.

Heri looked at him as if he were insane.

Heri had spent the rest of her day in her room, reading and napping. Uncle Vernon had some rich bloke and his wife coming over for dinner, and neither her aunt nor uncle had called her down to do the cleaning. Likely they thought she'd infect a plant with her magic or something. She had been stretched out on her bed in another snooze when something poked at her shoulder.

She had awoken to a little creature with large, bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls crouching on the bed next to her. She had been too shocked to go for her box-cutter she kept under her pillow. The creature slipped off the bed and bowed so low that the end of its long, thin nose touched the carpet. Heri noticed that it was wearing what looked like an old pillowcase, with rips for arm- and leg-holes.

It had proceeded to tell her that it was a house-elf, and his name was Dobby. Dobby then launched into a fervent spiel about how she absolutely couldn't go back to Hogwarts because it had heard about a plot to plant something dangerous at the school and she couldn't return because she could die.

Dobby was very insistent that Heri absolutely couldn't be allowed to die.

If it wasn't for the fact that she was looking forward to going back to school to get away from the Dursley's, Heri might have given the suggestion of staying at Privet Drive more merit.

"Listen, Dobby, I appreciate you coming here to warn me, but I don't think it would be a good idea for me to stay."

Dobby looked distraught.
"But, Miss—!"

"Listen. From what you've said, it doesn't sound like they're after me in particular. That means that something's going to happen that will affect everyone at school. It's nice that you think I'm important enough to be kept away specifically, but everyone else would still be in danger. If I stay here and don't get a chance to tell anyone about it, lots of people could get hurt."

"Hери Potter is brave and noble," said Dobby, his eyes filling with tears as he stared up at her with stark adoration.

"Tell you what," Hери continued. "I'll send a letter to the headmaster and warn him that something bad's going to happen. I'll tell him that I've been told that I could be killed if I go back, and that I've been advised to stay away. This way, the school can be made more secure and hopefully whatever trouble that'll happen can be stopped at once. Does that sound alright to you, Dobby?"

Dobby bowed his head.

"Albus Dumbledore is being the greatest headmaster Hogwarts has ever had. Dobby knows it, Miss. Dobby has heard Dumbledore's powers rival those of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the height of his strength. But, Miss," — Dobby's voice dropped to an urgent whisper — "there are powers Dumbledore doesn't . . . powers no decent wizard . . ."

He seemed on the verge of doing himself harm. Hери caught a hold of him before he could disturb her relatives.

"I see you're very bothered by this," she said. "But I can't in good conscience hang around with the Muggles while the school is in danger. People need to be warned at the very least."

Dobby did not look convinced.

"I won't make it far in the world without an education, Dobby," Hери pointed out. "Not going back to school just isn't an option. How about . . . how about this? You seem to know a good deal about what's going on even though you can't tell me about it. Since you seem to be the clever sort that gets around without being caught, maybe you can be my bodyguard while I'm at school. You won't have to be around all the time of course, I wouldn't want you to get in trouble with your family, but if it makes you feel better, you can watch out for me."

Dobby was thrilled. He immediately let Hería know how he thought about her suggestion by pelting her with words of thanks.

"Hería Potter, Miss, is the greatest witch in the world!" He squealed. "Miss is being good enough to listen to what Dobby has to say!"

"Of course I'll listen to you. You've come to help me out, haven't you? It would be poor manners to not take you seriously."

Hería walked over to her desk and pulled out a bit of paper to write on.

"I'll write Professor Dumbledore right now so you won't have to worry about that anymore. I dare say Hedwig would love to have a letter to carry out. I don't do much letter-writing you see — don't get much post either. Hedwig must get terribly bored as my post-owl."

While Hería wasn't looking, Dobby froze up and looked dreadfully guilty. When she noticed the cheery creature's odd silence, Hería looked up with her letter still in her hand.
"What's wrong?" she asked, giving the house-elf a once-over.

Dobby fidgeted.

"Heri Potter mustn't be angry with Dobby. Dobby did it for the best —"

Heri didn't like the sound of that one bit.

"Dobby, what have you done?" Her tone was flat and uncompromising.

Dobby blinked anxiously up at her.

"Heri Potter, Miss, mustn't be angry . . . Dobby hoped . . . if Miss thought her friends had forgotten her . . . Heri Potter might not want to go back to school, Miss . . ."

"Have you been taking my post?" Heri was appalled. Gods! Had her friends from school been writing her then? They must be terribly cross at her for not replying.

"Dobby has them here, Miss," said the elf.

He pulled a thick wad of envelopes from the inside of the pillowcase he was wearing. Heri could make out Hannah's neat writing on the top of the pile, Ernie's hasty scrawl, and more of the like. It looked like anyone she had ever been friendly with at school had written to her. She even saw a scribble that looked as though it was from Hagrid.

If the Dursleys hadn't told her to make sure their dinner guests didn't know she existed, she would be shouting.

"Dobby . . ." Heri hissed. Her eyes narrowed in irritation. "It's one thing to try to keep me from school. It's something else completely to steal my post. It's a criminal offence among the Muggles!"

Dobby tugged at his ears in contrition.

"Dobby is sorry, Miss! Dobby didn't know what else to do!"

Heri sighed huffily.

"Oh, just give them here."

She stuck out her opened hand wherein Dobby placed the bundled stack. She placed the stack on her desk and gave it a bothered glare.

"I'll be up all night writing replies!"

The house-elf babbled out words of apology but Heri merely waved them off with a huff.

"Just don't do something like this again," she told him.

Dobby nodded enthusiastically in response.

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Ron Weasley wasn't sure what he had been expecting when he was told they were going to pick up Heri Potter and bring her home with them. The plan was insane, and they were definitely going to get caught — no way was their Mum going to miss them not being in the house at the same time Dad's car went missing. Still, Fred and George invited him along when he had caught them sneaking out of the house, and he wasn't about to turn down the chance of seeing pretty Heri Potter again,
especially up close.

The neighbourhood they arrived in looked nothing like what Ron had imagined the place where Heri would live would look like. He had been expecting bigger and cooler. Not that the houses weren't tidy and organised, but it just didn't feel like a place where a hero would live.

"Which house was it, again?" Ron heard George say from the driver's seat.

Fred scanned the area. He replied, "Number 4."

George had the invisibility on so that Dad's turquoise muggle vehicle was slowly gliding at roof-level down the street as the boys peered out at the numbers written on the houses. Odd numbers on one side and evens on the other, and they had just passed Number 2 and 3 so —

"There it is!" Ron exclaimed, jabbing his finger on the glass at the house in question.

George pulled the car in closer so they could get a look into the windows. Heri had never said anything about her relatives while at school, but the trio of boys simultaneously decided that alerting the Muggles that they were there and hoping to take Heri away with them was a bad idea.

All the lights were out, so those within were clearly sleeping. The first window they checked had a sleeping couple within, obviously Heri's aunt and uncle. They glided away and turned the corner of the house to check the next window. They were in luck; the curtains were open and the sleeping figure in the bed beneath the sill had the dark mess of curls distinctive to Heri Potter.

George shimmied closer to the side of the house with the passenger side of the car pointed at the window.

"Go wake her," George whispered to Fred, nudging his twin's shoulder.

Fred did as he was told, lowering the window of the car door and leaning out of it as far as he could without falling. He tapped on the window softly at first, but then knocked more distinctly when she showed no sign of waking up.

"Heri!" Fred whispered harshly, smacking the glass with the flat of his palm. She couldn't have heard him through the glass but she jolted awake all the same.

Ron saw her reach under her pillow pulled something out from underneath it. It must have been something shocking because Fred gaped at her.

"What's she doing with a knife?" Fred breathed.

Heri Potter slept with a knife under her pillow? It sounded like what a hero would do, but it didn't match up with the Heri's personality.

Heri leaned into the window to get a better look at them. Her eyes widened in shock. Ron could see her mouth, "Fred?" before she slid open her window and leaned out.

"Fred, how did you — What the — ?"

"Here now, I'm George!" Fred protested. Trust the twins to get their jokes in whenever they could squeeze them.

Heri gave him the flattest look Ron had ever seen.
"Don't even try to kid me. I can tell you two apart perfectly fine!"

"Oh?" George chimed in, leaning over to peer past Fred. "Do tell how you've managed that."

Heri huffed.

"Never mind telling you two apart! What are you lot doing here?" She shot a bewildered glance at Ron in the backseat. "Where did you even get a flying car?"

"A better question would be why haven't you been answering any of our letters?" Fred retorted. "We've sent you about twelve inviting you to come over but haven't gotten a single one in reply!"

Heri ruffled her mussed hair.

"I've been having post troubles since the beginning of summer," she told them. "I haven't been getting any of my letters until just recently and I just got them all in bulk the night before. I haven't sent you a reply yet because I'm still sifting through them. I would love to come over though, by the way."

"How did that happen?" Ron chimed in, lowering his own window. "I've never heard of owls delivering letters to the wrong place. Usually, when an owl can't get to the person the letter's for they'll just return home with it."

She smiled wryly.

"Someone was taking them off the owls before I could get at them. It's all been sorted now, so no worries."

"If you say so," Fred shrugged. He clapped his hands decisively. "Now! Let's get your stuff in the car and get out of here!"

Heri's eyes widened.

"You mean right now! I'll never hear the end of it next summer if I leave now!"

"It's now or never, munchkin," said Fred. "We've only got the car for tonight and we won't get another chance like this any time soon."

"Oh, alright," Heri sighed. "Just help me get my stuff ready. My uncle has my trunk in the cupboard under the stairs, and none of my clothes are folded."

Huh, Ron thought. He hadn't expected Heri Potter to fold so easily into doing something that was definitely against the rules. Didn't seem the type. Ron had thought the twins would have to fast-talk her into it.

Heri stepped back to make room for Fred as he opened the car door and pulled himself through her window. George climbed through after. As the twins crept out her room ("Watch out for the bottom stair — it creaks.") Heri flitted about, tossing things into one of those bags girls always had on them.

"Here," she said, handing the bag over to Ron when she was finished. Ron took the bag and tucked it under the seat in front of him to make space.

The twins came back, panting a bit at the trudge from downstairs. Fred climbed back into the car.
to pull with Ron while Heri and George pushed from the bedroom side. Inch by inch, the trunk slid through the window. They all breathed out a sigh of relief when they got it in without much trouble.

"Hurry up!" Fred said as George climbed back into the driver's seat. He gestured to the space left in the back seat as he slid back into the passenger seat.

"Just let me..." Heri bent over her desk and scribbled something on a scrap of paper left behind. She then left the page on her bed before pulling herself up through the window.

"I've left them a note," she told them. "I doubt they'll care over much, but I figured it couldn't hurt to give them a bit of notice."

She swung herself into the seat next to Ron where he finally got a proper look at her. She was bare-foot and dressed in a sort of long-sleeved sleeping shirt that went half-way down to her thighs. Ron would have thought she was wearing the shirt and nothing else if it hadn't been for the slip of striped shorts he saw while she settled herself. She had grown some over the summer — Ron covertly appreciated the subtle curve of her breasts as she stretched tiredly.

"One more thing!" Heri said as George revved the engine. She leaned out her window and put her cupped hands to her lips. The hoot of an owl rang out, sounding as if it came from Heri.

As if summoned, a Snowy owl swooped in after a moment.

"We're off to the Weasleys' house," Heri said to the bird. "You're free to do as you please of course, but I'll have some letters waiting for delivery some time tomorrow if you're up to it."

The owl chuffed amicably and flew off.

Heri grinned at them.

"Right then! All set."

Ron wasn't certain what he had been expecting when his older brothers said they were going to bring Heri Potter home to visit, but he certainly hadn't expected the lengths they had to go through to get her there.

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Dear Hagrid,

I'm sorry I haven't replied until now, but I've been having trouble getting my post this summer; I got everything in bulk only a few days ago. I've been penning replies like mad since I got my letters, so I hope you'll forgive me if my handwriting is not as neat as usual.

I'm currently staying with the Weasley family. The twins and their younger brother came to get me from my relatives' house, extending an invitation for me to stay over with them. Naturally, I agreed, and I've found the company to be very agreeable. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley treat me like their own child and it's been great fun seeing how a magical family functions.

Mrs. Weasley knows so many useful spells that I never considered might have existed (spells for taking care of little things like cooking and mending) and I can't wait to try them out myself. They also have this fascinating clock with all of their names on the hand that point to things like 'at school', 'at work', and 'in mortal danger.' I have a pocket watch I'm rather fond of that shows days, weeks, months, moon cycles, and planetary movements on top of the standard hours and minutes;
do you think I might be able to enchant it to have a setting where it does what the Weasleys’ clock does? I think that would be terribly useful.

I have gotten to know the other families that live nearby as well. The Diggorys have a son named Cedric in the same year as Fred and George who’s in Hufflepuff. He’s a nice chap, but he’s not around much since he goes out with his friend quite often. Mr. Lovegood has a daughter that’s going to be a first year this year named Luna. She’s a sweet girl though she does seem a bit absent-minded. I haven’t met the Fawcetts yet but I’ve been told they have a daughter in Ravenclaw. Do you know any of them, Hagrid? I suspect you know quite a lot about all the families that have children in Hogwarts.

Thank you for the birthday present you sent me by the way. The cake was delicious and dragon figurine is great fun to play with. Hedwig appreciates the figurine as well. Was it supposed to be a reference to Norbert and Enoch? I hope so since it reminds me quite a bit of both of them. I have named it Ignis because of the lovely fire it creates. I’m hoping to learn an engorging charm soon so I can make Ignis big enough for Enoch to play with.

Anyway, there’s not much else to say except thank you for writing. I wasn’t expecting any mail and it was a pleasant surprise when I saw how many letters was waiting for me.

I hope to talk to you more when school starts up again. Our usual tea times?

Love,

Heri

P.S. I find the youngest two Weasleys to be very odd. Ron and Ginny do quite a bit of absolute nonsense whenever I see them. When I first met her, Ginny trod on her nightgown and managed to trip up the stairs. Just this morning, when I asked Ron question, he turned almost purple and put his elbow in the butter dish. I asked Fred and George about it, but they just gave me secretive smirks. What do you suppose is wrong with them?

After being misplaced during Floo travelling, stumbling around a shady shopping district only to be save by Hagrid at the last minute; dashing about with the twins and Ron for school supplies; and then being shoved about in a ruddy bookstore; Heri was in no state of mind to deal with pretentious pretty-boys with nothing but their looks to go on.

Flourish and Blotts had been the place Heri was looking forward to the most. She hadn't thought to look up books about the Olympians the year before, what with her too distracted by other pressing matters, but she had put it at the top of her to-do list for this year. Heri had thought to pop in, get a clerk to point her in the right direction, and then pop back out a few minutes later — that plan was being stomped all over by the toothy clown taking up breathing space in the middle of the store at the moment.

Gilderoy Lockhart. Apparently, he was some big-shot adventurer that jumped on every chance to kill himself via dangerous creature. Failing that, he wrote books about the nonsense he got up to and wrote them in the same manner one would for a children’s book. He was a popular author and had housewives swooning after him, Mrs. Weasley included.

Heri didn't understand the appeal. Sure, he was story-book dashing, but there didn’t appear to be much substance underneath. Really, just look at how he titled his books! Wandering with Werewolves? Voyages with Vampires? Was he writing autobiographies or a fantasy series? Not only...
that, but the underlying feel of the books irked her as well. Heri had no problem with people that had an incurable affliction, but she didn't see the point of actively searching them out. It was like discrimination; sure he was hanging out with them, but he was doing that because they were werewolves and vampires, not for who they were as people.

And now she had been pulled in by the same insubstantial blow-hard to pose for pictures for The Daily Prophet.

Lockhart had caught sight of Heri when Ron made a disparaging remark loud enough to catch the sparkly blond’s attention. He had leaped to his feet like the chair had burned his arse and shouted, "It can't be Heri Potter!"

Oh, she couldn’t, could she? Then why had he dragged her forward for the crowd to gap at?

She had pasted a bewildered but amicable smile on her face and waved to the excited audience.

Lockhart took her free hand and bent to place a gallant kiss on it as the photographer — the one Ron had snarked about — hopped about like mad, clicking away like his job was on the line. The herd of excitable females swooned and sighed at Lockhart's 'chivalry.'

Lockhart straightened as the photographer motioned for them to stand together.

"Nice big smile, Heri," he said through his own gleaming teeth. "Together you and I are worth the front page."

So that was his game. Well, she supposed if he was trying to amp up his reputation as some monster-hunter/adventurer, being seen on friendly terms with a national hero who's been celebrated for over ten years would only do him favours.

Not one to make public scenes, Heri smiled sweetly as requested, blinking cutely up at the man shoving a camera in her face.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said loudly, waving for quiet. "What an extraordinary moment this is! The perfect moment for me to make a little announcement I've been sitting on for some time!"

Lockhart went on to present Heri with the stupid autobiography that he was doing book-signings for that day and expounded how he was going to blah blah blah. Heri put on a face of avid attention, but really she had tuned him out the moment he had oped his mouth. Something about being a teacher? Somehow, Heri doubted he had the proper N.E.W.T.s for that. Well, she got the entire book-list for DADA off of him for free during his speech so she guessed it wasn't all bad.

He eventually freed her and she rejoined the Weasleys where they stood off to the side near the middle of the crowd.

Heri breathed a sigh of relief and smiled wryly for the waiting redheads, sharing a commiserating eye-roll with the boys. She had most of her books now and all she had to do was see one of the clerks at the counter to get the rest, then she could find the books on the Greco-Roman mythology she wanted. The side-stop with the grinning goon was an annoyance but now there was nothing standing in her way.

Then Malfoy showed up with his father in tow.

The situation went as well as could be expected.
Heri stood amidst the exclaiming crowd families and students waiting for the last call to sound. She had excused herself from the Weasleys by claiming to go look for her other friends. After dashing off a goodly distance to where the Weasleys could no longer spot her, Heri very purposefully slipped behind a pillar and threw her invisibility cloak over herself. Now unseen, she took in cheerful atmosphere with the same melancholy she had the year before.

"Did you hear about —?"

"Tildy, over here!"

"Watch your mouth, young man!"

"— and then I said —"

"Mum, look, look!"

They were all so bright. They shone so intensely under Heri’s unnatural sight. Was it because she quite literally saw with different eyes? It was at times like this that she wished she was as half-blind as she had been before her vision was corrected and improved. Then she wouldn't be able to see the contentment written so clearly on others' faces, their expressions shining in a way Heri knew she had never shined.

Was she just being a pessimist? She’d been prone to dreary moods in private for months now, maybe she was just depressing herself.

"— Heri yet?"

Heri looked up at the sound of her name.

A few paces off, halfway between the train and her, were Hannah and Sally-Anne, her two unofficial lieutenants — if Hufflepuffs were cutthroat enough for cliques, the two other girls would be her second- and third-in-command respectively. They were scanning the crowd and looking anxious.

"Haven't seen her," said Sally-Anne, idly twirling the end of her long braid through her fingers.

Hannah huffed and crossed her arms.

"It's almost eleven! Much longer and she'll miss the train!"

"She has to be here already," Sally-Anne consoled. "Didn't she say she was coming with the Weasleys? They're right over there so Heri has to be somewhere around here."

Before Hannah could go question the family of redheads, Heri pulled the invisibility cloak off and stepped out from behind the pillar.

"There you are!" Heri chirped. "I was just looking for you!"

"Heri!" they exclaimed in unison. They bounded over to her and pulled her into a group hug.

The three girls bustled off to the train to find a compartment before all the good ones were taken. As Hannah chattered Heri’s ear off about the latest news, a flicker out of the corner of her eye caught Heri’s attention. Stepping up on the train, Heri sent a grateful smile at her guardian apparition.
It should be known that Heri Potter was the centre-piece of an eclectic assortment of children, the sort that might not have come together if it wasn't for her acting as the drawing force.

It was often believed that Hufflepuffs were all the open-armed, exceedingly friendly sort, but those within knew that just because Helga Hufflepuff made it so anyone that didn't fit into the other three Houses were welcomed didn't mean they were all snuggle-buddies singing hymns around the fire. Sure, they weren't exclusive and cruel in their groupings and pecking order like the Slytherins were, but they still had social structuring. It went without saying that an internationally famous person like Heri would be at the top of the subtle hierarchy, and that her friends would be up there as well.

There was no denying that they originally gravitated to her because she was a living legend, a heroine straight out of their bedtime stories; they were children and they were shallow. They came to stay when they discovered that Heri was genuinely someone they admired and cared for by her own merits, but the hero-worship never completely faded.

The first was Megan Jones, the first one that approached Heri when she had been Sorted. Megan was a scatter-brained chatterbox, the sort that delighted in gossip and scandals but wasn't mean enough to spread rumours herself. She was from a middle-class family and her parents ran a successful apothecary. She had an older sister that played Quidditch professionally, but Megan herself was not sporty. If she hadn't made friends with Heri, she likely would have ended up a Quidditch groupie, squealing over the players with the other fan-girls.

After Megan came Zacharias Smith. He was a prickly sort, almost as haughty and stuck-up as Malfoy, but not as aggressive. He made himself quite plain when he started to hangout with Heri's crowd, letting everyone know right off the bat that he didn't like most of them at all, and that he was only sticking around because he was friends with Ernie, and that he wasn't about to associate with a group of lesser prestige. He often poked fun of Wayne and sneered at Megan, but redeemed himself through the fact that he didn't discriminate when being a berk — he was an equal-opportunity arsehole. He was an only child and the heir to the House of Smith — a minor family, but one that dated back thousands of years.

Acting as Zacharias' buffer was Ernie Macmillan. He and Zarcharias acted like Yin and Yang. He was a pleasant sort, a laid-back smooth-talking bloke that one would expect from a Noble Family. He had been earnest in his pursuit of Heri's friendship though he wasn't blind to the fact that such an association would make him 'cooler.'

Ernie had learned over the summer from his father that the House of Macmillan and the House of Potter had had a formal alliance for some generations now, and it had made him even more glad that he had sought Heri out. He was an only child and the heir to the House of Macmillan, a family that since the 1400s had been lords of one of the Unplottable counties that the wizards had taken with them when they separated from them Muggles.

Hannah Abbot was from another Noble Family, though they were nowhere near as old as Ernie's, Zacharias', or even Heri's. Her family had gotten their title only half a decade before the Statute of Secrecy was set into place. They didn't even really have any property, just a comfortable three-storey house set on five acres of land in Godric's Hollow, but they made up for it by being well-connected. (Coincidentally, the Potters had been one of those connections.) Hannah had made friends with Heri when she saw how ruffled Heri was when the first wave of fans set upon her and decided to help her out.

Hannah was another girl that could have gone to Gryffindor but ultimately ended up in Hufflepuff.
because of her loyalty. She was snarling wildcat in the face of those she deemed under her protection — those currently being everyone in their circle of friends — and wasn't afraid to smack a bitch if it came down to it. (It came down to it only once so far when a nosy Ravenclaw a year older than them tried poking at Heri's scar with her wand — the girl had been sent crying to the Hospital wing with hideous acne that resembled tentacles.) Ernie had once joked that if Heri was a mafia boss, Hannah would have been her right hand.

Then there was Sally-Anne Perks, who would have been the shallowest one of the bunch if it wasn't for the fact that she honest and forthright in her intentions.

Sally-Anne was a muggleborn who had opted for a magical education instead of going to a school for performing arts like her family had originally planned. She was always caught up in her appearance and doling out fashion advice to the rest of them — she was the stereotypical blonde and wasn't ashamed of it in the least bit. In some ways, she was the most popularity-driven one of the lot; she was always aware of how she looked and scolded the others when they did lame things. In other ways, she was the most unbothered: she genuinely didn't care that Heri was the Girl Who Lived; to Sally-Anne, Heri was cool because Heri was talented and charismatic. She was the definition of a ditz but she was well-intentioned.

Last came Wayne Hopkins, one that had definitely gotten into Hufflepuff for not being the type that any of the other Houses valued. He was a half-blood that had been raised by his widowed muggleborn mother in the non-magical world. He was a smart, boy but nowhere near driven enough for Ravenclaw, what with his lack of regard for learning for the sake of learning. Truthfully, he didn't have much going on for him expect for the fact that he got on well with pretty much anyone. Wayne would have been the poster-boy for the sort that the other Houses thought Hufflepuffs were like if it wasn't for the fact that he was quick enough to know how to make friends in high places, with Heri, Hannah, Ernie, and Zacharias buffing up their real-world social standing. Zacharias and Sally-Anne might have been put off by him for their reasons, but Heri honestly enjoyed his company, he being the sort that she had protected from bullies back during primary school.

Yes, they were an odd bunch, the oddest grouping out of all of those in Hufflepuff, but they had not only prestige on their side, they also had numbers: seven was the biggest number of kids in a circle within one House, the group usually being three or four if it was confined to one House. In a few more years, they would be force to be reckoned with.

After the Start-of-Term Feast, Heri sought out her Head of House. She had sent her dorm-mates up to bed ahead of her after Professor Sprout finished her address to the first-years about being in Hufflepuff. Heri caught the older lady as she was about to return to her office.

"Professor?" said Heri. "Has the headmaster said anything to you about the letter I sent him this summer?"

Professor Sprout looked curious.

"A letter? No, he's said nothing to me about a letter. If you wanted to tell me something, dearie, you'd be better off sending a note to me directly."

"Oh, well, the letter really was for Professor Dumbledore, but I thought he might have said something to you about it since I doubt keeping it a secret would do any good."

"Goodness! What's all this about then?"
"Well, this summer, someone came to warn me about a plot they overheard," Heri explained. "He was really quite frantic about it — something about planting a dangerous object and powers no decent person would involve themselves in. He told me that he believed that I was in danger of getting killed, and he advised me to not come back to school. Naturally, I sent off a letter to the Headmaster at once because if I would be in danger, everyone else would be in danger as well. I thought all the professors would have been told about it."

Professor Sprout looked alarmed.

"If it isn't one thing, it's another," said the professor, rubbing her eyes. She looked at Heri sharply. "You were very smart to let the school know about this, dear. Merlin only knows what kind of mess would be on our hands if we were all sitting in the dark!"

"Yes, ma'am. I wasn't going to just not say anything, of course!"

The professor patted Heri on the shoulder.

"You can go on off to bed now — I'm going to see the headmaster about this right away."

Lockhart proved himself to be as useful as fur on a banana. Heri had thought there was some quick-wittedness under all that idiocy — what with how he showed publicity-awareness when she met him — but any credit she might have given him was wiped off the board by his blatant incompetence.

"He's so dreamy!" Megan had sighed as they had reviewed their textbooks the night before. "Like a prince out of a fairytale!"

Sally-Anne had made a vague sound of agreement.

"He certainly looks the part; his hair is magnificent! I wonder what shampoo he uses."

It soon evident that his looks was all Lockhart had to work with, not that his fangirls would admit to that.

Earlier that day, when Hufflepuff was having Herbology with Gryffindor, he had been getting in Professor Sprout's way while she had been tending to some of her more dangerous plants.

"Just been showing Professor Sprout the right way to doctor a Whomping Willow!" Lockhart had said, looking as fresh as a spring daisy while the Herbology professor was as grimy as one was supposed to look after playing in dirt. "But I don't want you running away with the idea that I'm better at Herbology than she is! I just happen to have met several of these exotic plants on my travels . . ."

Professor Sprout, who had looked distinctly disgruntled, had sent them off to the designated greenhouse gruffly, not at all her usual cheerful self. Dealing with idiots did that.

The smiling menace made himself a bigger bother when he pulled Heri aside before she could enter the greenhouse and began edifying himself under the thinnest veneer of offering her 'fame advice.'

"Heri, Heri, Heri," Lockhart had said, reaching out and grasping her shoulder. "I understand. Natural to want a bit more once you’ve had that first taste — and I blame myself for giving you that, because it was bound to go to your head — but see here, young lady, you can't go shouting about attacks on the school to try and get yourself noticed. Just calm down, all right? Plenty of time for all
that when you're older."

*Excuse him?* Had he been told about the letter she sent Dumbledore and took it as her trying to get attention? Was he a complete moron? Heri resented being called a show-off almost as much as she hated being called a liar!

She couldn't completely conceal her disdain for him.

Lockhart saw her expression but misunderstood it entirely.

"Yes, yes, I know what you're thinking! It's all right for him, he's an internationally famous wizard already! But when I was twelve, I was just as much of a nobody as you are now." — Heri's jaw clenched. A tingle ran down her throwing arm — "In fact, I'd say I was even more of a nobody! I mean, a few people have heard of you, haven't they? All that business with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!"

He glanced at the lightning scar on her forehead.

"I know, I know — it's not quite as good as winning Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award five times in a row, as I have — but it's a start, Heri, it's a start."

He gave Heri a hearty wink and strode off.

Hari stood stunned at the utter gall of the man for a few seconds before she remembered that the great braggart had made her late for class. She prayed heatedly to Eris for the worst of luck to befall him before she stiffly realigned herself into character and went to join her class. She was so outraged that she only paid half of her attention to the lesson on mandrakes.

If all that wasn't enough, the preening peacock had made a spectacle of himself later that day during DADA.

Hari had walked in, accompanied by the usual swarm surrounding her. She had managed to get a seat comfortably in the middle where she would become one of the faces in the crowd, thus unlikely to be called on during lesson.

When the whole class was seated, Lockhart cleared his throat loudly and silence fell. He reached forward, picked up Neville's copy of *Travels with Trolls*, and held it up to show his winking portrait on the front.

"Me," he said, pointing at it and winking as well. "Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin: Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defence League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award — but I don't talk about that. I didn't get rid of the Bandon Banshee by *smiling* at her!"

He waited for them to laugh.

A few people smiled weakly.

Honestly, he *doesn't talk about that*? That was the second time he had mentioned the useless award just this morning!

"I see you've all bought a complete set of my books — well done. I thought we'd start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about — just to check how well you've read them, how much you've taken in —" When he had handed out the test papers he returned to the front of the class and said, "You have thirty minutes — start — *now!*"
The test was a joke — it had nothing to do with defending themselves and everything to do with Lockhart. It wasn't even mostly about the monsters he had fought either, there were questions about his personality and personal habits. Heri was offended even entertaining the thought of knowing the answers to such questions; she felt molested just by reading the words.

"Tut, tut — hardly any of you remembered that my favourite colour is lilac." (Since when was knowing the teacher's favourite colour a part of the curriculum? Heri tried to imagine what a Potions class would be like if Snape asked for his favourite colour during a lecture.) "I say so in Year with the Yeti. And a few of you need to read Wanderings with Werewolves more carefully — I clearly state in chapter twelve that my ideal birthday gift would be harmony between all magic and non-magic peoples — though I wouldn't say no to a large bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky!" He gave them another wink.

Heri was embarrassed just listening to him talk. She resisted the urge to hid her face in her hands. That he could say such things so shamelessly! A good lot of the others were eating it up though; Heri thought she saw Hermione Granger of all people sighing like she was trying to expel her heart through her mouth.

Lockhart completed his failure of an attempt at teaching by releasing a cage of Cornish Pixies on the unsuspecting class. And then he tried to 'save' them.

"Peskipiski pesternomi!"

Bugger. Him.

Heri didn't need her Latin lessons to know that such an incantation was as effective as shouting 'hocus pocus!' It was regular English trying to pass off as Latin! Pesky pixie, pester no me? Mangling one's native tongue didn't make it a spell!

Lesser known fact: Cornish Pixies were a part of a subcategory of Magical Creatures called the Fae — technically demons but not inherently malevolent enough to be called Dark Creatures. The ones that called themselves Unseelie were outright amoral, 'paying a tithe to Hell' every seven years, but they generally left wizards alone enough that the Ministry didn't put restrictions on them. Another reason for the lack of censure against the Fae was the fact that their biggest weakness — iron — was the easiest material for a wizard to manipulate; even the shoddiest of wand-wavers could conjure iron and do a bit of Transfiguring on it.

It was with all this knowledge that Heri transfigured a splintered chair leg — one that was broken off while students were fleeing the room — into a pile iron needles and charmed them to fling themselves at the flying menaces.

The Cornish Pixies might have had the intelligence levels of squirrels, but they made up for it with great survival instincts. Once the iron came hurling, they scattered faster than an overturned ant-pile, the ones that had been hoisting Neville up by his ears dropped him faster than a hot potato. Their high-pitched shrieks of pain when she landed a hit on one of them was music to Heri's ears.

Heri had had quite enough of Lockhart's nonsense. He had tried to run off the moment the pixies threw his wand outside so if the prancing prat got an impromptu ear piercing while Heri was herding the pesky blighters out of the windows . . . well, there was no one that could hold it against her.

Colin Creevey was an endearing boy that would have been far easier to put up with if it wasn't for his blasted picture-taking habit.
Heri and her posse had been hanging out by their favourite fountain in the Charms Courtyard, relaxing between classes. They had been talking about what they had gotten up to over the summer when Heri became aware that she was being watched. Looking up while laughing at something Ernie had said, she saw a very small, mousy-haired boy staring at her as though transfixed. He was clutching what looked like a muggle camera, and the moment Heri looked at him, he went bright red.

"All right, Heri?" he said breathlessly, taking tentative steps forward.

Heri's crowd observed the boy closely, eyeing him as if he were a threat.

"I'm — I'm Colin Creevey — I'm in Gryffindor. D'you think — would it be all right if — can I have a picture?" he said, raising the camera hopefully.

"A picture?" Heri repeated. She glanced at Hannah from the corner of her eye.

Hannah had been the one that had buckled down against the people that crowded her for pictures the year before when she saw how overwhelmed Heri was by them. As expected, Hannah had crossed her arms and was looking at Creevey with a flinty stare.

"So I can prove I've met you," said Creevey eagerly, edging further forward. "Everyone's told me so much about you. About how you survived when You-Know-Who tried to kill you and how he disappeared and everything and how you've still got a lightning scar on your forehead." His eyes raked Heri's hairline. "A boy in my dormitory said if I develop the film in the right potion, the pictures'll move."

Colin drew a great shuddering breath of excitement and said, "It's amazing here, isn't it? I never knew all the odd stuff I could do was magic till I got the letter from Hogwarts. My dad's a milkman, he couldn't believe it either. So I'm taking loads of pictures to send home to him. And it'd be really good if I had one of you" — he looked imploringly at Heri — "maybe one of your friends could take it and I could stand next to you? And then, could you sign it?"

"Signed photos? You're giving out signed photos, Potter?" Loud and scathing, Malfoy's voice echoed around the courtyard. He had stopped right behind Colin, flanked by his large and thuggish cronies as he always was.

"Everyone line up!" Malfoy roared to the crowd. "Heri Potter's giving out signed photos!"

"You're just jealous!" piped up Colin, whose entire body was about as thick as Crabbe's neck.

"Jealous?" said Malfoy, who didn't need to shout anymore; half the courtyard was listening in. "Of what? I don't want a foul scar right across my head, thanks. I don't think getting your head cut open makes you that special, myself."

Apparently, the summer holiday had built back up Malfoy's bravado. He hadn't done more than glare at her after the dragon thing the year before, but it appeared that returning to his spoiling parents hiked up his courage again.

Heri's smile turned bland at the sight of Malfoy.

"Whoever said it did? Was there something you wanted, Malfoy?"

The boy glared at her.

"What I want is for you to know how pathetic you are."
Heri's smile did not waver even as her friends bristled.

"Ah, is that so? Well, thank you for informing me. Feel free to be on your way."

"Don't think you can dismiss me! I'll stay as long as I please!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Malfoy, did you want a photo too? Maybe if you ask nicely, Colin will give you a copy."

"But if you want it signed, it'll cost you!" Hannah added snidely.

The entourage of Hufflepuffs snickered.

Heri ignored the blond boy as he made to say something in retaliation. Hannah had the situation well in hand and it was easy for Heri to let the other girl take the reigns of the confrontation.

Hannah had Malfoy stalking away in a snit quicker than blinking.

"You mind taking the photo, Wayne?" Heri asked of the only brunet in their group as she beckoned Colin toward her.

As Wayne took the camera from the younger boy, Colin beamed.

Colin ended up getting the signed photo he just as he wanted, though he decidedly did not end up giving one to Malfoy. Unfortunately, he took Heri's agreement to a photo as permission to pop up and click photos of them whenever he felt like, effectively becoming Heri's paparazzi.

Luna Lovegood blinked her wide, baby-blue eyes in slight disorientation. Between the few seconds it took for a couple of the girls from her dorm to snatch her bag and make a few snide comments, the time-line distorted and shifted. Wherein she was supposed to be friendless and suffer through petty bullying until her fourth year, now she would be on friendly terms with students in the other Houses have her dorm-mates suck up to her. She didn't understand how such a change could occur until she spotted Heri Potter standing stock still at the turn of the corridor, her group of friends pulling to a stop around her.

Heri's pleasant expression didn't waver, but Luna discerned a tightening along her jaw and a thinning of her lips.

"Luna!" said Heri brightly, seeming to not notice the other two Ravenclaw first-years standing there as well. She stepped forward and pulled Luna toward the other Hufflepuffs. "I was just thinking about you! Have you met my other friends yet? Come have breakfast with us!"

Luna blinked languidly.

"I would like that very much. I'll need to get my school bag back, of course — I was hoping to read ahead some before class."

Heri's eyes turned into merry crescents.

"What a good idea! I think I'll do the same today! So," — here she turned to the dumbstruck Ravenclaws still holding Luna's bag — "were you holding Luna's bag for her? How nice of you! Thank you for going through the trouble!"

Heri plucked the satchel from their limp grasps and returned it to Luna. She then turned her back
on them and beamed at the remaining group.

"I believe I've told you about Sally-Anne . . ."

As they walked away, Luna wondered what sort of being Heri Potter was that she could alter the reality of the time-line so suddenly and significantly.

Heri wasn't sure why she had thought she might not have made it onto the Quidditch team. If the fact that a spot was basically reserved for her from the year before wasn't enough, the moment she accidentally spiked a Bludger into a Snitch and made the golden ball explode took away any doubt.

It should be known that she hadn't meant to hit the Snitch — she had been aiming for the Seeker. Well, no, that didn't sound much better. Heri had meant to distract the Seeker from the Snitch by hitting the Bludger close enough that they were forced to veer off lest they be hit; Snitch explosion was not part of the plan. She didn't even know that she had hit the Bludger that hard!

Well, at least the Seeker had retreated as she wanted, though she wasn't sure if she like the horror-struck look in his eyes as if he had narrowly escaped death.

"I'm so sorry!" Heri had said, her eyes as wide as her almost-victim's.

In any case, she was on the team, both to her own delight and the Captain's. It was the damnedest thing: when that Snitch went up into dust, the Captain, Odric Winslow, lit up like his insides were on fire; he was all but singing Hallelujah.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Winslow had bellowed. "Keep that up, Potter! Let's see the other teams try scoring with you hammering Bludgers at them!"

From the looks on Fred and George's face — the only two outside of Hufflepuff that had managed to sneak into the tryouts — they agreed with Winslow's assessment.

Practices were three times a week and were as covert as Hufflepuffs could manage.

Dobby had somehow gotten himself in the school undercover, posing as one of the Hogwarts house-elves. Thinking on it, the position was the best one for a house-elf playing bodyguard: he had free run of the school whenever he had time away from his wizards (which was quite often since Dobby was just one of a handful, and not a favoured one either) and none of the other elves would miss him during the time he was skulking around because there were already a butt-load of elves at Hogwarts.

"Have you seen anything suspicious then?" Heri asked him once. She had been off to the Slytherin common room for a bit and there was plenty of time for her to talk privately with Dobby.

"Nothing yet, Heri Potter, Miss," Dobby replied. "But Dobby won't be taking no chances!"

Heri thought Dobby was being excessively paranoid considering that she knew for a fact that the school wards and fail-safes had been updated (Professor Sprout had told Heri herself). And it wasn't like Heri didn't know how to take care of herself, she had taken care of more monsters over the summer — some of wonky bird things that Hedwig helped her with and a huge snake with multiple heads — and none of them were exactly pushovers.

Wait — it was supposed to be a Dark object, so not exactly something she could beat into submission, was it?
Well, her box-cutter proved itself effective in monster-slaying, maybe she could use it to stab the whatever if it ever came around trying to kill her! Objects could be stabbed, right? So if it came right down to it, Heri would stab the shit out of the killer thingy, fuck waiting for a rescuer.

Half running down a corridor, a smile split Heri's face as she bounced off to visit Hagrid for their usual tea time. She had only spent a few minutes cuddling with Enoch before she was pulled off for Quidditch practice the last time, and she was determined to have a longer stretch of relaxing with her large friend this time around. She had a bundle of pastries she had gotten from the school elves via the twins and couldn't wait to share it with Hagrid.

Spotting the opening to the courtyard that led to Hagrid's hut, Heri picked up her pace, her bag bouncing against her leg. She was almost full out sprinting when her attention was jarred.

ssssSSSSSSSSSSSSS

Heri screeched to a halt. What was that —?

Hisssss

There it was again! She turned on the spot and scanned the corridor she had come from. Nothing. Completely empty save herself. She could have sworn . . .

§Bite . . . Ssssoooo hungry . . .§

Heri blinked when she realised what she was hearing. Had some kind of reptile found its way into the school? It was a rather odd time for a snake or lizard to be out and about considering the weather and location. Had another student brought it along as a pet?

Heri shrugged to herself. Well, it was none of her business. If a person couldn't keep up with their familiar, it was their own fault if they lost it. In any case, the school was teeming with critters that a reptile could eat so whatever it was that was hissing would be fine on its own.

Heri put the hissing out of her mind and continued on her way.

"Many people are under the false assumption that the Switching Spell is actually swapping out one item for another," Heri told her friends as she showed them how to perform the spell by 'switching' an apple with a glass phial.

It was just after the lecture portion of the class and they had just started their attempts at transfiguring. Wayne asked Heri for tips when his phial kept coming out fruit-shaped if it changed at all.

Heri shuttered to herself. Well, it was none of her business. If a person couldn't keep up with their familiar, it was their own fault if they lost it. In any case, the school was teeming with critters that a reptile could eat so whatever it was that was hissing would be fine on its own.

Heri put the hissing out of her mind and continued on her way.
"Now, the reason it's called the Switching Spell is because of the method used to perform the spell. Instead of picturing the two objects transforming into each other at the same time, you visualise them trading places. I find it easiest to imagine the two things sitting apart and then sliding toward each other until they overlap and then end up on the opposite side of where they started."

"Excellent explanation, Miss Potter," praised Professor McGonagall. Heri looked up and smiled at the older woman. She continued, "Very few people realise the particularities of this spell, even when they study more in-depth on the subject."

Heri earned ten points for her explanation, gaining thirty in total for Hufflepuff by the end of the lesson.

Making her way down into the dungeon, Heri wondered if this was another instance of her usually good habits backfiring on her, like the time she didn't check the mail over when her Hogwarts letter was in the pile. This time, her sense of courtesy — the force that made her abhor impoliteness — had her agreeing to go to the Death-day party of the Gryffindor House ghost. She wasn't sure why a ghost would celebrate the day they died — nor why one would invite a living student after just one idle conversation in passing — but she had been invited by the host personally, and it would have been bad manners not to show up.

At least this way she wouldn't have to make her friends feel awkward by sitting in the dorms while everyone else was at the Halloween Feast; this way she wouldn't have to watch them flail about, not knowing how to make her feel better about the night her parents died in front of her.

The passageway leading to Nearly Headless Nick's party had been lined with candles, though the effect was far from cheerful: These were long, thin, jet-black tapers, all burning bright blue, that cast a dim, ghostly light over her still living face. The temperature dropped with every step she took. As Heri shivered and drew her robes tightly around her, she heard what sounded like a thousand fingernails scraping an enormous blackboard.

Was that supposed to be music?

She turned a corner and saw Nearly Headless Nick standing at a doorway hung with black velvet drapes.

"My dear friend," he said extravagantly. "Welcome, welcome . . . so pleased you could come . . . " He swept off his plumed hat and bowed her inside.

It was an incredible sight. The dungeon was full of hundreds of pearly-white, translucent people, mostly drifting around a crowded dance floor, waltzing to the dreadful, quavering sound of thirty musical saws, played by an orchestra on a raised, black-draped platform. A chandelier overhead blazed midnight-blue with a thousand more black candles. Heri's breath rose in a mist before her; it was like stepping into a freezer.

Heri opted to take a walk around the perimeter in hopes of heating up her feet. Taking care not to walk through anyone, she set off around the edge of the dance floor. She passed a group of gloomy nuns; a ragged man wearing chains; and the Fat Friar, the cheerful Hufflepuff ghost, who was talking to a knight with an arrow sticking out of his forehead. Heri wasn't surprised to see that the Bloody Baron — the gaunt, staring Slytherin ghost covered in silver bloodstains — was being given a wide berth by the other spectres.

On the other side of the hall was a long table, also covered in black velvet. She approached it curiously but next moment had stopped in her tracks, gob-smacked. The smell was quite disgusting!
Large, rotten fish were laid on handsome silver platters; cakes, burned charcoal-black, were heaped on serving trays; there was a great maggoty haggis, a slab of cheese covered in furry green mould and — in pride of place — an enormous grey cake in the shape of a tombstone, with tar-like icing forming words:

Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington

died 31st October, 1492

Heri watched, amazed, as a portly ghost approached the table, crouched low, and walked through it, his mouth held wide so that it passed through one of the stinking salmon.

"Can you taste it if you walk through it?" Heri asked him, curiosity getting the better of her.

"Almost," said the ghost sadly, and he drifted away.

Heri resolved then and there that when she ever died, she wouldn't stick around as a ghost if she could help it. She'd rather her soul be wiped from existence all together than pine after putrid slop she wouldn't feed to the pigs of her most hated enemy.

Heri eventually ended up in a conversation with the stocky ghost of a former Hogwarts student named Myrtle and Peeves the Poltergeist of all people. Peeves was being his usual awful self and had gotten poor Myrtle to crying. Wailing really — there was a reason she was known as Moaning Myrtle.

"Come now, Myrtle," said Heri, trying to soothe the miserable spirit. "You know Peeves says things like that just to get a reaction. More than half the things he says aren't true in the least bit, and I certainly wasn't talking badly about you; I've only just met you tonight!"

"Don't lie to me," Myrtle gasped, tears now flooding down her face, while Peeves chuckled happily over her shoulder. "D'you think I don't know what people call me behind my back? Fat Myrtle! Ugly Myrtle! Miserable, moaning, moping Myrtle!"

"You've forgotten pimply," Peeves tacked on.

Moaning Myrtle burst into anguished sobs.

Heri glared something fierce at Peeves.

"You keep your awful words to yourself, Peeves! Poor Myrtle feels badly enough by herself!"

Without thinking, Heri reached out her hand to pat the other girl on the back, not remembering that ghosts were insubstantial. It seemed that reality had forgotten the fact as well since Heri's hand landed on Myrtle's shoulder just as it would have if she had been touching Wayne's shoulder. She got in two quick pats before all three of them froze and stared at Heri's hand as if it had fallen off.

"You can touch me!" Myrtle yelped, her eyes bugging out of her head. Her exclamation drew the attention of nearby ghosts. Soon it was as if every phantom in the room was beside themselves with shock.

Suffice to say the party then become less about Sir Nicholas' death and more about Heri's new found powers. It turned out that the ability to physically touch a ghost was unheard of.

The day after Halloween, Heri heard about the horrible thing done to Mrs. Norris, Mr. Filch's
wretched cat. She was told by a riveted Megan about the words painted on the walls, the declaration by someone claiming to be the Heir of Slytherin which was also a threat to muggleborns, if what Megan had overheard was to be believed.

"The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the heir, beware."

Heri had a sinking feeling in her stomach that this was connected to the danger Dobby was trying to protect her from.

The teachers had sprung into action at the first hint of danger, already wary from the forewarning they had gotten via Heri. Students were now required to travel in groups at all times outside of the common rooms. Prefects had their tardiness to their classes overlooked as they accompanied the younger years from lesson to lesson. While many of the older students thought it was all overkill ("Nothing but a melodramatic threat and a harassed cat," griped Marcus when Heri asked him about it), the three youngest years were jumping at shadows.

Unsurprisingly, Lockhart was all for the drama. His classes became devoted to the other monstrous creatures he had defeated that had the potential to do the same damage ("Definitely a Mongolian Death Worm! The other professors have been begging me to look into it since I told them!") and how he'd defeat it as soon as it showed itself.

The Quidditch match between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff was half won before the game even started. Rumours had circulated about Hufflepuff's especially strong team this year. They had a new starting Seeker in the form of Cedric Diggory — an all-around friendly bloke who was quite popular in his year— the returning Chaser trio composed of the Captain and two fellows that had been on the team for three years already; a quick-witted sixth-year girl by the name of Alabasandria Goodnight as Keeper; and a fifth-year boy named Mordechai Cohen as a Beater alongside Heri. Coupled with the fantastic tales of Heri's physical strength, they had the Ravenclaws already deciding how they'd be admitting defeat gracefully.

Hufflepuff's past defeats were rarely because of lack of talent but because they just didn't have it in them to possibly do others harm during the game. Cohen was the perfect example of the typical Hufflepuff Beater: accurate and strong, but never aiming to knock anyone off their broom. More often than not, they tried to confuse the opposition but did so half-heartedly, not thrilled at deceiving.

And then entered Heri.

Heri had absolutely no qualms about blasting a bloke off his broom, nor was she bashful in her disruption of the Ravenclaws' plays.

Because of their opposing dispositions on the Pitch, Winslow had set Cohen to play defensive while Heri went on the offensive. While Cohen kept the Chasers and Diggory safe as he could manage from one Bludger, Heri took control of the other.

Flying close enough to it that it chased after her, Heri shot the Bludger through Ravenclaw's manoeuvres and at their Keeper in hopes of sending them out of the game. At a muffled swear-word shot in her direction by their Seeker, Heri even sent it rocketing at Chang, resulting in a splintered indentation in the stands just inches from the Asian girl's head.

In the end, Diggory caught the Snitch while Heri knocked Chang clean off her Comet 260 with a Bludger to the gut. It almost ended in fatal injury when one of the Ravenclaw Beaters let loose a Bludger before realising Diggory had caught the Snitch, but Heri managed to intercept the loose ball by whacking another Bludger at it, causing the two to collide only a few feet from Diggory and
The victory party afterwards was one to be remembered.

The entire school had been twitchy since the bloody writing on the wall. Malfoy's words indicating how muggleborns were the target along with Creevey being laid up in the Hospital Wing only stirred up greater unrest. While the teachers maintained that things were under control, the fear of the unknown was still there.

As if answering their prayers, notices were posted announcing the creation of a Duelling Club. Upon thinking about it, Heri concluded that it was unlikely that whatever was prowling the school would be duelling anyone. Monsters weren't really the sort for structured wand-play. Still, the other students were heartened so at least morale was picked up.

In the Great Hall that evening, the dining tables had vanished and a golden stage had appeared along one wall, lit by thousands of candles floating overhead. The ceiling was velvety black once more and most of the school seemed to be packed beneath it, all carrying their wands and looking excited.

"I wonder who'll be teaching us?" said Ernie as they edged into the chattering crowd. "Someone told me Flitwick was a duelling champion when he was young — maybe it'll be him."

"As long as it's not —" Wayne began, but he ended on a groan. Looking in the direction the boy was glaring, Heri could see why: Gilderoy Lockhart was walking onto the stage, resplendent in robes of deep plum and accompanied by none other than Professor Snape, wearing his usual black.

Lockhart waved an arm for silence and called, "Gather round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excellent!

"Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little dueling club, to train you all in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions — for full details, see my published works."

Really? Was now really the time to promote merchandise?  

"Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape," said Lockhart, flashing a wide smile. "He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about dueling himself," (Oh, did the moron have a death wish?) "and has sportingly agreed to help me with a short demonstration before we begin. Now, I don't want any of you youngsters to worry — you'll still have your Potions master when I'm through with him, never fear!"

"Wouldn't it be great if they finished each other off?" Heri heard Zacharias mutter.

Hannah and Megan gave him a filthy look while Heri swallowed the laugh that threatened to escape her.

Professor Snape's upper lip was curling. Heri wondered why Lockhart was still smiling — if the Potions' professor had been looking at her like that, she'd be getting ready to defend her life.
The two professors turned to face each other and bowed; at least, Lockhart did, with much twirling of his hands, whereas Professor Snape jerked his head irritably. Then they raised their wands like swords in front of them.

"As you see, we are holding our wands in the accepted combative position," Lockhart told the silent crowd. "On the count of three, we will cast our first spells. Neither of us will be aiming to kill, of course."

Heri watched Professor Snape bare his teeth. He looked fit to kill.

"One — two — three —"

Both of them swung their wands above their heads and pointed them at their opponent.

"Expelliarmus!" cried Snape

There was a dazzling flash of scarlet light and Lockhart was blasted off his feet. He flew backward off the stage, smashed into the wall, and slid down it to sprawl on the floor.

Malfoy and some of the other Slytherins cheered. Hell, Heri was tempted to cheer as well but she didn't want to do anything Malfoy's ilk approved of.

Lockhart got unsteadily to his feet. His hat had fallen off and his wavy hair was standing on end.

"Well, there you have it!" he said, tottering back onto the platform. "That was a Disarming Charm — as you see, I've lost my wand — ah, thank you, Miss Brown — yes, an excellent idea to show them that, Professor Snape, but if you don't mind my saying so, it was very obvious what you were about to do. If I had wanted to stop you it would have been only too easy — however, I felt it would be instructive to let them see . . ."

Professor Snape expression could have melted solid stone. Possibly Lockhart had noticed, because he said, "Enough! I'm going to come amongst you now and put you all into pairs. Professor Snape, if you'd like to help me —"

They moved through the crowd, matching up partners. Lockhart paired students together with little care, creating teams like Theodore Nott with Neville, Lavender Brown with Zacharias, and Sally-Anne with Millicent Bulstrode. It was like he couldn't see what kind of disasters he was creating!

And it was a disaster. Spells of all colours were shot out with little attention to the spell they were supposed to be practising.

"I said disarm only!" Lockhart shouted in alarm over the heads of the battling crowd. He might as well had been shouting at the clouds to stop raining for all the good his words did.

"Stop! Stop!" screamed Lockhart, but it was no use.

Fed up at the situation, Professor Snape took charge.

"Finite Incantatem!" he shouted, jabbing his wand into the air. All at once, the spells of the students deteriorated, returning the room and its inhabitants back to normal.

"Dear, dear," said Lockhart, skittering through the crowd, looking at the aftermath of the duels. "Up you go there, Macmillan . . ." — Heri and Hannah sprang into action and pulled Ernie away — "Careful there, Miss Fawcett . . . Pinch it hard, it'll stop bleeding in a second, Boot —"
"I think I'd better teach you how to block unfriendly spells as well," said Lockhart, standing flustered in the midst of the hall. He glanced at Snape, whose black eyes glinted, and looked quickly away. He forced a cheery smile back onto his face. "Let's have some volunteers — How about it, Miss Heri Potter? And maybe — ?"

A hand shot into the air before Heri had the time to decline.

"I volunteer, Professor!"

There, stepping out from where she had been fawning over Malfoy, was Pansy Parkinson, a simpering look on her face. Malfoy whispered something in her ear and she smirked widely.

"Excellent, excellent!" said Lockhart, "Up on the stage with the two of you."

Unwilling to make a scene by protesting now, Heri grudgingly climbed up on the elevated platform, her face smooth and relaxed.

"Now, Heri," said Lockhart as Snape attended to Parkinson. "When Pansy points her wand at you, you do this."

He raised his own wand, attempted a complicated sort of wiggling action, and dropped it.

Professor Snape smirked as Lockhart quickly picked it up, saying, "Whoops — my wand is a little overexcited you see —"

Parkinson stood haughtily as she waited, her expression as smug as ever.

Heri eyed the other girl and said to Lockhart, "Professor, do you mind showing me that block again?"

"Scared, Potter?" Parkinson called out, tittering nastily.

Heri's lifted her brows in a questioning manner. She allowed some cattiness to escape her.

"Of you? Maybe if you were aiming at a person standing next to me."

Muffled snickers broke out as Parkinson flushed and then glared at Heri.

"On the count of three!" Lockhart called out from where he stood at the edge of the stage.

The girls held their wands at the ready.

"One . . . Two~oooo . . . Three!"

Heri tossed up a simple shield as Parkinson flung a trip jinx at her. Without waiting the amount of time expected of her during what was supposed to be a demonstration, Parkinson fired a stinging hex.

Already having enough already of being on the defensive, Heri dodged lightly to the side and returned fire by turning one of Parkinson's shoes into a squid.

Parkinson squealed at the disgusting feel and fell to the ground. Snarling, she shrieked, "Serpensortia!"

Heri watched, startled, as a long black snake shot out of Parkinson's wand. It fell heavily onto the floor between them and coiled defensively, hissing angrily. There were screams as the crowd backed
swiftly away, clearing the space at the edge of the stage.

It looked to be a rat snake, a constrictor type that had only a little venom that actually didn't do much harm to a human. They were also docile by nature unless they were harassed. Unfortunately, the shouting and running about did absolutely nothing for its temperament.

§What is this?§ The snake lashed its tail in agitation as it flicked its tongue out and took in all the confusing scents in the Hall. §Threat?§

"Parkinson, are you mad?" said Heri, her eyes not leaving the enraged serpent. "You just brought an angry snake into a crowd of people!"

"Don't move, Potter," said Professor Snape, his wand at the ready. "I'll get rid of it —"

"Allow me!" shouted Lockhart. He brandished his wand at the snake and there was a loud bang. The snake, instead of vanishing, flew ten feet into the air and fell back to the floor with a loud smack.

Infuriated, hissing savagely, it reared caught sight of the trembling Justin with his wand pointed at it.

§This is threat?§

Poised to strike, the snake bared its fangs.

§Stop!§ Heri commanded, her hand stretched out as if to physically pull the animal away from the terrified boy.

There was gasping silence as the incensed snake turned from Justin to regard Heri instead.

§Threat speaks . . . commands . . . §

Heri slid slowly down from her standing position until she was seated on her on the stage with her legs tucked under her. Just as slowly, she put her hand to the floor.

As kindly and non-threateningly as she could manage, she said, §There is no threat. It was not our intention to bring you here. Come here if you please and I'll find a way to return you.§

The snake considered Heri's words for a moment before it decided to disregard them, rearing back up to attack Justin again.

Heri pounded the stage with her fist and hissed like an enraged cat. The thunderous sound made audience and snake alike jump and flinch. She gave the disobedient thing a chilling look.

§Do you think me to be common prey? Come here at once or I'll kill you.§

Cowed, the serpent slithered over to the offered arm and coiled itself into Heri's heat. Heri brought the arm up and cradled it to her body, running her other hand soothingly over its scales. The snake hissed in pleasure and relaxed.

Once the reptile was settled docilely in her arms, Heri's shoulders slumped and she let out a shuddering breath. Her unblinkingly gaze fell to the ground just in front of her as she tried to calm her heartbeat.

Heri looked up at the continuing silence. She caught Snape's shocked eyes and asked, "Can you send it back, Professor? It was terribly confused and angry at being summon'd."
It turned out that many people had problems with a person that could talk to reptiles. Why, Heri didn't know, but the ability apparently made her the prime suspect for the mess about the Heir of Slytherin and the Chamber of Secrets. It was now popularly believed among the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws that she had it out for Colin Creevey from the beginning and that he was petrified because he got on her nerves.

"She's a *Parselmouth*," said a chubby Ravenclaw that had often made an idiot of himself trying to get her attention before. "Everyone knows that's the mark of a Dark wizard! Have you ever heard of a decent one who could talk to snakes? They called Slytherin himself Serpent-tongue."

Not to his face, likely, Heri thought as Hannah overheard the comment and came down like the wrath of the gods on the dissenters.

"No one knows how she survived that attack by You-Know-Who. I mean, she was only a baby when it happened. She should have been blasted into smithereens. Only a really powerful Dark wizard could have survived a curse like that," a Gryffindor a year older than her had said. "That's probably why You-Know-Who wanted to kill her in the first place. Didn't want another Dark Lord competing with him. I wonder what other powers Potter's been hiding?"

Beyond the touch of irritation (really, did they think they were entitled to know everything about her?), Heri took the sudden backlash nonchalantly. She was used to people thinking the worst of her from years of being a 'delinquent.' Her friends on the other hand refused to take it sitting down. In fact, most of Hufflepuff sided with Heri on this; they circled the proverbial wagons tighter that a miser's fist and snapped at anyone that tried to take badly about Heri.

It was amusing to watch usually non-confrontational Hufflepuffs snap and curse at the nay-sayers. A colourful auxiliary of spells were hidden behind those shy facades; it came to a point that many of those that pointed fingers at Heri came to flinch at the sight of yellow.

"It's the stupidest thing!" Ernie had said, outraged on Heri's behalf. "Not last week they were all but kissing your feet! And now you're the source of all evil? Two-faced arse-kissers!"

Her friends in the other Houses weren't quiet in their defense of her either. Luna and Neville weren't the punch-in-the-face sort, but they didn't waver when they got poked at for their commitment. The Weasleys were split in their reactions — while none of them believed Heri to be the Heir of Slytherin person, how they dealt with their stance varied.

Fred and George found it all very funny. Whenever they crossed paths on the way to classes, the two went out of their way to march ahead of Heri down the corridors, shouting, "Make way for the Heir of Slytherin! Seriously evil witch coming through!"

Heri, of course, wasn't about to walk with heralds shouting her entrance without doing it in style. Like a princess deigning to walk among her subjects, Heri strolled through the halls as if her feet didn't even touch the ground. Her friends found it amusing as well and played at being her attendants.

Percy was deeply disapproving of this behaviour.

"It is not a laughing matter," he said coldly when he came across them during such a play.

"Oi, get out of the way, Percy," said Fred. "Heri's in a hurry."

"Yeah, she's off to the Chamber of Secrets for a cup of tea with her fanged servant," said George, chortling.
Ginny didn't find it amusing either. She hadn't said more than two words to Heri since the year began, but she couldn't stand any insinuation that Heri was at fault.

"Oh, don't!" she wailed every time Fred asked Heri loudly who she was planning to attack next, or when George pretended to ward Heri off with a large clove of garlic when they met.

Heri didn't mind; the school could use a few jokes. She'd seen cemeteries that were more lively.

As she was unbothered by the accusations, Heri spent time in the Library looking up Parselmouths. She hadn't known that the ability was rare. She had come across references to it before in the books she read, but none of them had mentioned it was some weird taboo. Well, at least in England it was — it seemed to be a coveted skill in the East. Either way, she researched why exactly it was such a big deal.

It turned out that Britain had a bad string of luck with Parselmouths in the past — not only was the Hogwarts founder with a bad reputation a Parselmouth, Voldemort and some evil bloke named Herpo the Foul were as well. They proved themselves to be a rotten lot, but their existence didn't erase people like Paracelsus and Ascelpius. That would be like saying all blondes were horrible just because the Malfoys existed.

Heri did wonder where her ability came from though. Any inheritable magical traits had to come from her father's line (since her mother was the first witch in her family), but as far as she knew the Potters didn't have anything that could be called a bloodline trait beyond the infamous Potter hair. She'd have to get a look at the family grimoire that she had left in her bank vault.

More study into the subject of serpents and people with power over them led Heri back into mythology and magical creatures.

The nagas of South-East Asia were a semi-aquatic species of magical beings that had the capability to mate with humans. The offspring and descendants of such unions almost always had the ability to talk to snakes. Other creatures, like lamiae, gorgons, and yuan-ti shared this trait. Heri wondered if the Slytherin family came from such a union.

There was a long list of gods that were associated with snakes and other reptiles as well. There was Apep, Set, Ningizzida, Apsu, Agni, Sobek, Cien-Tang, Typhon, Indra, Marduk, Moma, and Ophion amongst others. All of them had fascinating stories, but it was Ophion that caught the brunt of her attention. It turned out that there was another variation of the Greek creation story wherein Ophion and his wife Eurynome ruled Olympus before they were overthrown by Kronos and Rhea.

Now that she was thinking about it, Heri wondered where the primordial gods and the titans lived now that they no longer had Olympus. Were they on another plane of existence? Or maybe they still were on Olympus but they just weren't running the metaphorical show anymore. Maybe it was like grandkids moving in with their aging grandparents and taking over the running of the house while the older folk eased back from responsibility. Maybe they were in the big retirement home in the sky, playing bingo and shuffle-board while reminiscing about the good ol' days when nectar and ambrosia was only two Drachmas for a whole barrel instead of 25 for a pint.

Indelicate whispering distracted her from her flight of fancy. Heri looked up from the book she was reading and gave the table of gawking students next to her a bland look. They looked away hurriedly as she gathered up her books to find a quieter spot.

The accusations got more fervent when Justin ended up petrified as well. Heri didn't know how they explained her attacking another person of her House, but it was apparently another mark against
Heri snuggled into one of Hagrid's enormous chairs contentedly, Enoch cuddling up to her on one side, Ignis, her dragon figurine, on her other side. It was a few days until Christmas, and she was spending the bulk of the snowy holiday evenings in the cosy cottage. With a large fire in front of her, a bowl-sized mug of cocoa warming her hands, Hagrid telling amusing stories beside her, Heri was inordinately pleased.

As Hagrid got up to refill his mug of mead, Heri remembered that today was Winter Solstice. Taking up one of Hagrid's special holiday fruitcakes, she tossed the pastry into the fire and sent well-wishes to the gods of Olympus, praying they were having a restful a Solstice as she was having.

It might have been her imagination, but Heri felt a wave of gratitude wrap around her.

Even though students weren't supposed to go around by themselves any more, Heri still found time to sneak away. Ever since Halloween, she had been visiting Myrtle in the second floor girl's toilet to experiment with her odd power with ghosts. So far, they had discovered that not only could she touch them, but while she was in contact with them they were temporarily physical. Myrtle had a wail of a time revelling in being able to feel things again, crying in joy the first time she had picked up one of Heri's books.

This time though, a great flood of water stretching over half the corridor that looked as though it was still seeping from under the door of Myrtle's lavatory greeted her. Holding the hem of her robes over her ankles, Heri stepped through the great wash of water to the door bearing its out of order sign and entered.

Myrtle was crying, if possible, louder and harder than ever before. She seemed to be hiding down in her usual stall. It was dark in the loo because the candles had been extinguished in the great rush of water that had left both walls and floor soaking wet.

"Myrtle, what's happened?" Heri called out.

"Who's that?" sniffled Myrtle miserably. "Come to throw something else at me?"

Heri waded across to her stall and said, "It's Heri. Who's thrown something at you?"

Technically speaking, even if something had been thrown at Myrtle, it wasn't going to do her any harm, but it was still rude.

"Don't ask me," Myrtle shouted, emerging with a wave of yet more water, which splashed onto the already sopping floor. "Here I am, minding my own business, and someone thinks it's funny to throw a book at me!"

"Who would ever want to though?"

"I don't know. I was just sitting in the U-bend, thinking about death, and it fell right through the top of my head," said Myrtle. "It's over there, it got washed out . . ."

Heri looked under the sink where Myrtle was pointing. A small, thin book lay there. It had a shabby black cover and was as wet as everything else in the loo. She picked it up and saw that it was some sort of diary. Absently flipping through the pages for possible clue, she was disappointed in finding that it was completely blank.
"Why would anyone want to flush it in the first place?" Heri wondered aloud. Shaking her head, she she tucked the diary in her bag (she wasn't about to waste a perfectly serviceable notebook!) and changed the subject. "Well, I doubt they'll be coming back to the metaphorical scene of the crime. Would you like to read that new action-adventure book I promised you? I got it in the mail just after class."

The rumours against Heri died a sudden death when a Prefect and Sally-Anne ended up in the hospital wing. Many of the fickle crowd pelted them with apologies, but Heri's crowd circled in tighter than ever, glowering at anyone that tried asking for forgiveness. For a whole week, none of them talked to anyone not part of their circle, barely even saying anything to each other either.

Those of the student body that spoke against her finally realised what sort of curse they had narrowly avoided when Heri publicly grabbed Malfoy by the hair and smashed his face into a wall. The stupid boy had said that Sally-Anne has lost him money since he had bet that she would be the mudblood that died. They recognised the blank look on Heri's face as she watched Malfoy's goon cart him away to be the same one she had given her accusers when they gossiped about her.

Heri sprinted through the dense vegetation of the Forbidden Forest as if the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels. If one were to ask her, she might have preferred hounds instead of what actually was pursuing her. Spiders. And not the common, tiny spiders. Spiders the size of carthorses, eight-eyed, eight-legged, black, hairy, gigantic.

Oh, why had she thought it was a good idea to listen to Hagrid and let a trail of spiders lead her to a nest of acromantulas? She already knew that Hagrid was innocent! She didn't need a man-eating monster with a brood of its children hungry for her flesh to confirm that!

In her haste, and with the pounding of her blood in her ears, she didn't hear the sound of hoof-beats until the creatures producing the sound were upon her.

With a wild cry, a herd of centaurs burst through the foliage of the clearing Heri had entered and began to attack the giant spiders. A deluge of arrows rained down on the acromantulas, sending the shrieking and scrambling back. The centaurs advanced onto their foe, leaving carcasses underfoot as they pressed forward.

Heri clutched the front of her shirt as if she could somehow expand her chest so more air could enter her. She sat heavily on the ground and set about calming her heartbeat down.

"Are you alright?" said a voice to her right.

Heri started almost violently. She looked up to see one of the centaurs. He looked relatively young, resembling a man in his early twenties. He had white-blond hair and a stark white coat. He also had astonishingly blue eyes, like pale sapphires.

"Yes, sir," said Heri, still panting lightly. "Thank you for coming when you did."

"It was only chance that we were hunting those foul beasts while you were fleeing. No thanks are needed for what was meant to be."

Heri blinked up at him uncertainly.

"Whether my thanks are needed or not isn't really important, sir. I was in danger of being killed and eaten and your actions saved me. Therefore, gratitude is is order."
The centaur stared at her intently. His eyes flickered to her forehead.

"You are an odd one, Heri Potter."

Another centaur came trotting back, his flanks shiny with sweat. He was black-haired and -bodied with a wilder look about him than the first one.

"Firenze," the new centaur addressed the one still staring at Heri. "What of this human child?"

"I have yet to question her," the white one replied. "Why are you roaming the forest, child?"

Heri wobbled to her feet to address the properly.

"Hagrid has been taken away to prison for a crime he didn't commit, sir. Before he was taken away, he told me that if I wanted to know what was going on, I should follow the trail of spiders into the forest. I found the person he meant for me to find, but Aragog decided that he rather I didn't leave and sent his children to eat me."

The black-haired one snorted and tossed his head.

"You thought it a good idea to heed the words of a man who was expelled from his place of learning for harbouring a dangerous creature? You must be as thoughtless as he is."

"Bane!" Firenze admonished, but Heri didn't accept such a small chiding as enough for such a heartless statement.

Heri straightened her back and brought all the intensity of her glower to bear on the rude creature. Unbeknownst to her, a visible aura surrounded her, shrouding her and taking an almost identifiable shape.

"It's not your place to speak in such a manner against a man who had his sense of compassion for all types of living things used against him, sir!" she said, her words clipped. "I put my trust in Hagrid's words? I sure do! Hagrid is kind in a way not found in many other places, and I don't doubt that if he'd been with me, Aragog would have let us leave unharmed without a thought. It was a miscalculation of Hagrid's part, one that was brought on because of how rushed he was when he told me what to do, and I'll not stand here and let you degrade him!"

Neither centaur had anything to say after such a statement, they merely watched her, almost in awe.

Firenze looked to Bane.

"You see as I have seen?"

Bane looked astonished and a touch disbelieving.

"I do see, though I scarcely believe these eyes of mine."

"You know what must be done then?"

"Aye. I know it well. It has been written since the beginning."

Heri huffed.

"What are you two talking about now?"
Their gazes returned to her.

"You are both expected and a surprise to us, little hero," said Bane, his tone even. "As the ones who have discovered you, it is now our duty to teach you the ways you must be educated in lest you perish before your time."

Oh, great. More of this.

"What is with supernatural beings calling me a hero?" Heri griped. "First that cyclops, then that giant snake thing, and now you two! Just what exactly is so heroic about me anyway? I haven't done half the things people say I have!"

Firenze leaned in closer.

"You have already done battle against those that know you as a hero?"

Heri eyeballed him.

"Well, yes, sir. Though I don't know why everyone keeps calling me that."

"We have less time than anticipated," Firenze declared, not answering Heri's question. He bent his forelegs and motioned for Heri to climb up. "Do not tarry, the sooner we begin, the better."

"Will you be telling me what's going on?"

"All questions will be answered in time, Heri Potter. There is much to be told."

With a sixty-feet basilisk in front of her and the professors (who were supposed to be the ones dealing with the beast) blocked from the hall by the staggering pile of rubble, Heri couldn't help but wonder if it was her lot in life to be some sort of story-book protagonist. With a bird and a talking hat as the only back-up available, she certainly dealt with enough shit for the position.

She had alerted teachers! She had brought them directly to the entrance of the Chamber! Why did the structural integrity of the cavern have to demonstrate its degradation just then? And all it took was a single misfired spell? Clearly the architectural workmanship from the Founders' era did not live up to the hype of the rest of their accomplishments.

Fawkes was soaring around the basilisk's head, and the basilisk was snapping furiously at him with fangs long and thin as sabres — Fawkes dove. His long golden beak sank out of sight and a sudden shower of dark blood spattered the floor. The snake's tail thrashed, narrowly missing Heri, and before Heri could shut her eyes, it turned —

Heri looked straight into its face and saw that its eyes, both its great, bulbous yellow eyes, had been punctured by the phoenix; blood was streaming to the floor, and the snake was spitting in agony.

§NO!§ Heri heard the wraith of the juvenile Voldemort — Tom Marvolo Riddle — scream. §LEAVE THE BIRD! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE GIRL IS BEHIND YOU! YOU CAN STILL SMELL HER! KILL HER!§

The blinded serpent swayed, confused, still deadly. Fawkes was circling its head, piping his eerie song, jabbing here and there at its scaly nose as the blood poured from its ruined eyes.

The snake's tail whipped across the floor again and Heri leaped away. Making her jump,
something soft hit her face.

The basilisk had swept the Sorting Hat into Heri's arms.

The hat contracted, as though an invisible hand was squeezing it very tightly. A gleaming silver sword had appeared inside the hat, its handle glittering with rubies the size of eggs.

Well, that was lucky.

§KILL THE GIRL! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE GIRL IS BEHIND YOU!§

Heri was on her feet again, ready. The basilisk's head was falling, its body coiling around, hitting pillars as it twisted to face her. She could see the vast, bloody eye sockets, see the mouth stretching wide, wide enough to swallow her whole, lined with fangs long as her sword, thin, glittering, venomous —

It lunged blindly — Heri dodged and it hit the Chamber wall. It lunged again, and its forked tongue lashed Heri's side. She raised the sword in both her hands —

The basilisk lunged again, and this time its aim was true — Heri threw her whole weight behind the sword and drove it to the hilt into the roof of the serpent's mouth —

But as warm blood drenched Heri's arms, she felt a searing pain just above her elbow. One long, poisonous fang was sinking deeper and deeper into her arm. It was of the same proportions of a buffalo's horn. She watch detachedly as the tip punctured through to the other side of her arm. It splintered off from the creature's jaw as the basilisk keeled over sideways and fell, twitching, to the floor.

Heri slid down the wall. She gripped the fang that was spreading poison through her body and wrenched it out of her arm. But she knew it was too late. White-hot pain was spreading slowly and steadily from the wound. Even as she dropped the fang and watched her own blood soak her robes, her vision went foggy. The Chamber was dissolving in a whirl of dull colour.

A patch of scarlet swam past, and Heri heard a soft clatter of claws beside her.

"Fa-awkes," said Heri thickly to the Headmaster's bird. "You were fantastic. Sorry I . . . I couldn't . . . Th-thanks for . . . everything . . ."

She felt the bird lay its beautiful head on the spot where the serpent's fang had pierced her. She could hear echoing footsteps. A dark shadow moved in front of her.

"You're dead, Potter," said Riddle's voice above her. "Dead. Even Dumbledore's bird knows it. Do you see what he's doing? He's crying."

Heri blinked. Fawkes' head slid in and out of focus. Thick, pearly tears were trickling down the glossy feathers.

Heri felt drowsy. Everything around her seemed to be spinning.

"So ends the famous Heri Potter," said Riddle's distant voice. "Alone in the Chamber of Secrets, forsaken by her friends, defeated at last by the Dark Lord she so unwisely challenged. You'll be back with your dear mudblood mother soon, Potter . . . She bought you twelve years of borrowed time . . . but Lord Voldemort got you in the end, as you knew he must . . ."

If this was dying, thought Heri, it wasn't so bad. Even the pain was leaving her . . .
But was this dying? Instead of going black, the Chamber seemed to be coming back into focus. Heri gave her head a little shake and there was Fawkes, still resting his head on her arm. A pearly patch of tears was shining all around the wound — except that there was no wound —

"Get away, bird," said Riddle's voice suddenly. "Get away from her — I said, get away —"

Heri raised her head. Riddle was pointing Heri's wand at Fawkes. There was a bang like a gun, and Fawkes took flight again in a whirl of gold and scarlet.

"Phoenix tears . . ." said Riddle quietly, staring at Heri's arm. "Of course . . . healing powers . . . I had forgotten . . ."

Wondering at her luck, Heri seized the basilisk fang on the floor next to her and plunged it straight into the heart of the book before Riddle could stop her. There was a long, dreadful, piercing scream. Ink spurted out of the diary in torrents, streaming over her hands, flooding the floor. Riddle was writhing and twisting, screaming and flailing and then —

He was gone.

Heri's wand fell to the floor with a clatter, and then there was silence. Silence except for the steady drip drip of ink still oozing from the diary. The basilisk venom had burned a sizzling hole right through it.

Heri wobbled to her feet, the basilisk’s fang still gripped in her fist. Ginny was passed out at the mouth of where the basilisk had come out. Judging by the rise and fall of her chest, she was still alive. Heri took in the sight of the basilisk, all sixty feet of its terrifying, blood-thirsty self. Standing next it it's incredible bulk, she felt smaller than she ever had before.

Moving on instinct, Heri staggered to the head of the beast. Even in death, the creature looked on the verge of attacking. Taking aim, the fang in her hand pierced the carcass under its jaw and dug out a venom-sack the size of watermelon.

Fingers tacky with blood both her own and of the monster's, Heri pressed the fang flat against the venom-sack and said, "I sacrifice these spoils of war to my divine parent, whoever they may be."

Chapter End Notes

The explanation for Switching Spells comes from The Engulfing Silence's Harry Potter and the Gift of Memories. A thoroughly well-detailed story with a unique Harry. I personally don't care much for Political!Harry, but even I recognize a well-formed one.

The idea for Heri as a Beater and the bit where she knocks a Bludger off target by hitting it with another Bludger was inspired by murkybluematter's The Serpentine Subterfuge. If you like Fem!Harry (Hell, even if you don't like it), novel-length stories, well-detailed plot-lines, fascinating characters, funny dialogue, realistic characterizations, you'll love The Pureblood Pretense series. Updates are slow but hella worth the wait.
The Metamorphosis, pt. 1

Chapter Notes

I never really addressed this in a AN on FF.net, but Heri having a crush on Marcus doesn't have to have a specific reason, y'know? She's a little girl in the beginning years of secondary school — girls get silly crushes. Girls get silly, 'stupid', and 'out-of-character' crushes just because. Have we forgotten about Hermione's absurd crush on Lockhart in CoS? Can any of us truly say it 'made sense' for her to like Lockhart, a man old enough to be her father with a personality she would sneer on if it was anyone else?

I dunno. I mean, yeah, there IS a point to it for my Heri, but I think her having an irrational crush that never goes anywhere and never adds to the plot wouldn't be Sue-ing her up or whatever. Yes, they're characters for our amusement, but they're meant to be PEOPLE too. They're not supposed to always make sense and be reasonable. Yes, I make it a point to make my Heri smarter and more mature (for a REASON), but for God's sake let the kid be a kid! Kids are entitled to be stupid at times!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Heri didn't know why she even bothered going back to the Dursley's — it wasn't like she didn't know how to get a room in the Alleys. She supposed it was natural for not-yet-grown lifeforms to instinctively want to return to where they were raised and cared for . . . but Heri wasn't sure why those instincts told her to go to Privet Drive of all places. Familiarity? Better a Hell you knew that one you didn't and all that.

In any case, as soon as she got back, Heri ran up to her room and locked herself in before a word could be said to her. She had had her fill of utter bullocks at school, she didn't need any of the Dursley variety.

Thankfully, the Dursleys took the hint and ignored her as they had the summer before. The fact that the atmosphere around her was just as bad if not worse than what it had been the summer before likely contributed to their decision to let sleeping dogs lie.

Heri spent an extended period of time wondering about her parentage. The centaurs had been utterly adamant that she couldn't be anything less than a child of a god, that there was zero possibility that it had been either one of her parents or both that had been the demigods — or 'godborns,' as they called it. This, of course, led her to wondering if one of her parents had been a god in disguise, or if it had been that one of them had cheated on the other with a god.

A bolt of repulsion shot up Heri's spine at the thought that she could have come from a bout of infidelity. She couldn't claim to understand relationships of adult nature, but her sense of righteousness howled at the thought of cheating. It was so dishonest! It was one thing if someone didn't want to be with another person anymore, she could accept that sometimes people just grew apart, but it was something completely different to pretend one was still committed while sneaking around. Leave if you wanted to — don't flat-out lie and pretend nothing changed.

Yanking at her hair, Heri beat down the urge to scream about the lack of integrity of it all, of going back on one's word, of saying one thing and doing the contrary. She wanted to thrash whatever she could get her hands on and shriek "injustice!" at the top of her lungs.
(Was this some sort of mental illness? It felt like some sort of mental illness. Was she supposed to be so fixated on an abstract ideal like this? She could hardly breathe with how worked up she was!)

Reigning herself in with a twitchy shudder, Heri huffed and turned her thoughts away from the how and back to the who.

It might have been naïve — and made her previous fit redundant — but she really wanted to believe that one of her parents had been a god in disguise. From the tiny bit she could remember of them and her own gut-feeling, she couldn't believe that Lily or James Potter could have cheated on each other. It was too far-fetched and out of character of them to do so. Didn't everyone say they were so in love? And they were Gryffindors for gods' sake — they were all about chivalry, meaning honor and justice!

Of course, if one of her parents really had been a disguised god, that meant that they were still alive but had left her to live as an orphan with the Dursley. Really, there was no way of winning in such a situation.

The entirety of the summer had been shaping up to be a repeat of before — all self-contained identity crises and voluntary isolation — when disaster reared its nasty head. Heri had worked up a good sulk that was taking up most of her time when it was announced over dinner that Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge, was coming for a visit.

"Couldn't be more excited to see you again, Dudley!" said Uncle Vernon, clapping his corpulent son on the shoulder. "She'll likely stay at least a week."

Heri hoped the bald-faced revulsion on her face communicated her feelings on the matter in a way that was unmistakable.

Taking the dreadful news as a hint to snap out of her funk, Heri took it upon herself to get the Hell away from Privet Drive.

Heri thrust her Hogsmeade permission slip under Aunt Petunia's nose as soon as the older woman was alone.

"Sign it and I'll be gone until next summer," she promised her aunt.

Not wanting such an opportunity to escape her, Aunt Petunia had yanked the form from Heri's hand and scrawled her signature out without even reading it. Not wanting to linger lest questions were asked, Heri nodded without a word and scurried back up to her room.

After a quick message via Hedwig to Wayne — the only one of her friends who was as familiar with the muggle world as they were with the wizarding — Heri learned how to call up a magical transportation service and quickly set to packing.

She took the Knight Bus to Diagon Alley right after breakfast the next day.

Diagon was as colourful as ever. Just the sight of it as she came out through the Leaky Cauldron heartened her. Heri took her time to appreciate the rejuvenating power of the cheery shopping district as she made her way to where she to hoped to stay. The Leaky Cauldron had a special place in her heart, but she had been raised too highly-strung to stay in a place where all sorts — including the disreputable and dirty — came and went as they pleased. Call her a snob, but she would pick a more discerning place if it was available.

(In odd tandem to how they would sooner throw out their telly than let Heri watch it with them, her aunt and uncle would sooner drag her along with them abroad to stay in a fancy hotel than leave...
her to her own devices and potentially mingle amongst 'unconventional' folk — they didn't want her 'getting ideas'.

Heri ended up staying at an inn down in Vertic Alley called the Nightengale's Cage. It was a corner building with walls a shade of watery blue and large tinted windows. The inside was much the same, but with painted birds flying across the walls. She got herself settled in a room that was much like what one would get at a respectable muggle hotel, but without the electronics. She paid for three nights in advance with the money she had left over from her trip for school supplies last year and decided to pop down to the bank the next day to top off her money pouch.

She should have known that a quick stop to the bank would be impossible for her.

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_Heri got to the bank a bit before lunchtime, while the crowd was thin. It was a good month before the school-rush started, so the crowd was even thinner than she had expected. She spotted an unoccupied teller and snagged the spot before a new line could form._

_When Heri had asked about going down to her vault, the goblin at the counter peered over the counter at her with a dubious once-over._

_"Your name?"

_Heri checked to make sure no one was in hearing distance before answering quietly, "Heri Potter."_

_It was a bit of a hullabaloo after that. The goblin teller asked for verification, looked over Heri's key when she presented it, and then asked if she would also be retrieving her heir rings._

_Heri, of course, had no idea what heir rings were, and promptly told her teller so._

_What followed was quite a bit of hollering in what she assumed was Gobbledegook, some confusion on her part when she was bustled out of the front area, and general discontent on the part of the goblins involved. She was shoved off into an office with an older looking goblin before she could understand what was going on._

_Grimbak—who turned out to be her account manager — was extremely unhappy about her ignorance. He gave her the nitty-gritty: how the Potters were amongst the magical families that were landed and titled before the Statute of Secrecy went into place ("Wizarding Britain does not currently have a royal family, but those of title and land before the enforcement of the International Statute of Secrecy retained their status nominally because it was through their collective power that the British Ministry of Magic was first formed."); how her father had been the 12th Earl of Heorshire (along with a handful of lesser titles); and how she was now of-age to formally assume the role of heir apparent by wearing the Potter Family heir ring._

_Heri had known that the Potters had been pretty influential and well-off, but she hadn't known how it came to be. All this new information was enough to make her dizzy._

_If that wasn't enough, she was also heir presumptive to another family — the Blacks, traditionally Marquess' of Swetechester._

_"All I wanted was to withdraw some money," Heri muttered to herself, trying to come to terms with the situation._

_"You would do everyone involved a favour by accepting your duties," said Grimbak severely, not allowing Heri to wallow. "Since the time that the mantle of Head of Potter House fell to you,
those accounts have been essentially frozen, neither making gold nor paying their dues. That's over a
decade of inactivity, Miss Potter. It is only because you are a minor that we haven't seized the
holdings as we would have had the vault-holder been an adult. You will not be obligated to
reactivate the vaults until you are seventeen, but . . ." — here he leaned in with a harsh expression —
"Gringotts highly recommends you do so as soon as possible."

Heri sighed through her nose and looked over at the portfolio of parchment listing her vaults,
properties, stock-holdings, and entitlements from various accounts. Grimbak had retrieved it when
she told him that she had thought she only had one vault. She picked up the cover page and read the
summary of her holdings.

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**Herakles Lilith Potter**

**Evans - Heir by Blood**

*Vaults:* #529 (14,437$	ext{GBP}$)

**Potter - Heir by Name and Blood**

*Vaults:* #132 (38,032,268$	ext{GBP}$, 13$	ext{F}$, 23$	ext{D}$ and assorted items) / #686 (54,662$	ext{GBP}$, 4$	ext{F}$, 9$	ext{D}$) / #687 (45,100$	ext{GBP}$, 9$	ext{F}$, 14$	ext{D}$)

*Properties:* Potter Estate, Heorshire, England/ Töpferei, Bavaria, Germany/ Bramblewood Hall, Massachusetts, U.S.A/ Vacation home, Verona, Italy/ Leonis House, Fife, Scotland

*Investments:* 42% Daily Prophet stocks/ 25% Magical Menagerie stocks/ 38% Nautilus’ Newts stocks

*Entitlements:* Wizengamot Seat, 14 votes/ Earldom of Heorshire/ Viscounty of Heaham / Barony of Nettlestone / Barony of Leonis

**Black - Heir by Name and Magic**

N/A

**Riddle - Heir by Magic**

N/A

**Collections Account**

*Vaults:* #782, #985, #639 (Total 196,284 Galleons and assorted items)

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A name jumped out at her.

**Riddle?** What? Was this the same Riddle family that that beastly spectre from the haunted diary
came from? If so, why was she set as their inheritor?

"What about the rest of these?" asked Heri, her voice revealing none of the breathlessness she felt.
"Evans is from my mother, but what about this Riddle person?" As an after thought, she tacked on,
"And what's a Collections account?"

Grimbak looked irked but resigned. He held his hand out for the summary and Heri gave it to him. He placed it on the desk between them and gestured for her to look.

"There are three ways to inherit accounts," he began. "The first is by blood, which means through the family." He pointed a clawed finger to Evans and traced down to Potter. "You are the only child of the late Lily Potter whose maiden name was Evans and you are a Potter by birthright.

"The second way is if you are formally named as the inheritor, which is what happened with the Potter Estate, the Black Estate, and the Collections account."

Heri nodded slowly, settling herself.

"And what about magic? It has that here, next to Black and Riddle."

"Yes, that's rather irregular," Grimbak replied. "The most recent of the Potter family was known to have ties to the Blacks; I believe your grandmother was born a Black, from the main branch even. That you are named heir implies that whoever is before you in the line of succession was either childless at the time and still is, or has decided to not have children at all. A magical heir is created when an adult shares his magic with a child whose core is still developing; that you are the Black heir by name and magic implies that whoever is before in the line of succession was close enough with your parents that they were allowed to perform an adoption ritual on you. Perhaps a godparent."

A godparent? Heri stiffened at the thought. Forget Riddle for a moment. Wasn't a godparent someone who was supposed to take care of her if her parents couldn't? If she had a godparent, where were they?

Heri asked this out loud.

Grimbak shuffled through a separate stack of parchment and pulled out a faded looking sheet. His eyes widened minutely before he looked up again with a blanked expression.

"It says here that your godfather is Sirius Black, lately an inmate of Azkaban."

That certainly didn't sound good.

"Azkaban?"

"A wizard's prison, Miss Potter."

The blanked expression had yet to change.

Well.

Heri wondered if she should be surprised or not. A criminal for a godparent felt strangely appropriate.

Heri eyeballed her account manager.

"I'm not thrilled to hear it, but why are you so shocked by this? You seem almost bothered."

The goblin scowled.

"You seem to be in the habit of not knowing things. It has been all over the news that Sirius Black has recently escaped from prison. Your ministry is throwing quite a fit."

"What did he . . . ?" she began. She tapered off at the outright alarmed look on Grimbak's pointy face. "That bad?"

"Many wizards have called it unspeakable."

"Right." That certainly didn't sound good. Heri sat on it for a bit. She then asked, "Would I be better served with the knowledge of what he's done? Will it somehow positively effect my day-to-day living if I know?"

Heri wasn't usually one who abided by 'ignorance is bliss', but neither was she the sort who sought out to fill her own head with horrible things she could do nothing about.

Grimbak gave her odd look.

". . . Doubtful," he said eventually.

Heri nodded decisively.

"Then I don't want to know."

She then straightened and leaned over the parchment once more. She tapped at the edge.

"What of this Riddle person then?"

The goblin flipped through the pages again, then shook his head.

"No previous business carried out with that name, nor have I ever heard it used in context with the Potters. I would have assumed it to be another godparent" — Heri sicked up a little in her mouth at the thought — "but your godmother is listed as Alice Longbottom. She is, unfortunately," Grimbak continued, anticipating Heri's question, "currently in the care of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, in the Janus Thickey Ward for patients with minds declared irreparably affected."

"Any relation to Neville Longbottom?" asked Heri, perking up at the surname.

"I do not handle the Longbottom accounts," was Grimbak's flat reply.

Heri fought back the urge to give Grimbak the two-finger salute while she considered what he had told her.

So, she had possible familial connections with Neville as well as Voldemort. What utter madness. The raving ghouls tried to kill her and now it turns out she's been designated as his heir? Had her failure to die made her a worthy candidate to take over the position when he was done with it? Was this how Dark Lords passed on the torch or something?

Well, whatever his intentions, if she ever got the chance to get her hands on his vault, she'd bleed him dry. She'd convert all his money into muggle currency and donate it to charity!

Heri motioned for Grimbak to continue.

"The next thing you should notice are the inheritable assets, the properties and investments. At the moment, you only have access to the Evans and Potter properties since you are the last living descendant. The other properties are off limits to you until the current Heads either gives you access or die. This is why their holdings are not listed."
"Entitlements," Grimbak carried on, "are the privileges that were granted by the Crown to the Noble Families, specifically to the Heads of House. Since you are the last direct descendant of your line, you are the de jure Head of your House. In the current iteration of your government, this translates to you having supreme authority over the regulation your constituents and a claim to a hereditary seat within the Wizengamot, your parliament. However, you are not obligated to attend to your civic duties of participating in the Wizengamot until you formally claim dominion, and by Family Law, you are not able to do that until your sixteenth birthday.

"I do, however, recommend seeing to your land as soon as possible. Towns and villages are generally self-sufficient in this day and age, but the county of Hautmont does not have a steward on record at the time being, and it has been over ten years since the Potter family has sent anyone to see to its people." Grimbak gnashed his teeth at his words. "They tend to pay their taxes more willingly when their leaders show active interest in them."

Bloody Hell, she already got that he wanted her to accept her responsibilities, he didn't to lay it on so thick! She had enough to think about with the revelation that she was apparently the equivalent of a medieval sheriff over people she had never seen and who likely didn't need an ignorant kid lording over them.

(She'd have to think about stewards and such later.)

"Right," said Heri, giving Grimbak her flattest look. She glanced down at the parchment again. "Now— Hang on! . . . What are these other vaults listed under Potter? The last one there's the one I've been using, but . . . The first one's the Family vault, yeah?"

"Yes, the vault system can become complicated," Grimbak answered. "The first vault is as you said, the Family vault. The first vault listed on any account will always be the Family vault in cases like this. The following vaults are usually trust and retainer vaults listed in order of creation. In this case, your Family vault is followed immediately by your father's retainer vault. When a minor turns fifteen, the status of his vault goes from trust to retainer, and he then has the responsibility to manage deposits and debts himself. In the case of a minor becoming the Head, the retainer vault will be absorbed into the Family vault. The Head — in this case, you — will then have full control of all the holdings."

"All right, so #686 was my dad's retainer vault . . . Why wasn't it absorbed into the Family vault when he become the Head of House?"

"The late Mr. James Potter never came in to claim the title after his parents' death in 1979. I assume the grief was still too close. Any time after that, I assume there was never a chance to do so."

"Right," Heri said again, getting a strange twinge in her stomach at hearing that her paternal grandparents died merely a year before her birth. "So why wasn't it absorbed when he died then?"

Grimbak shrugged.

"It's considered a personal account, and as such it cannot be subsumed into a Family vault unless there are no remaining blood descendants or until one of said blood descendants becomes the Head of House."

"We~ell . . ." Heri said, drawing out the word, giving the banker an old-fashioned look. "Here I am."
"Indeed, Miss Potter."

There was a pause the two of them merely looked at each other.

Heri tilted her head.

"Should I assume it'll be done now?"

"After you acquire possession of your Family signet ring and are accepted . . . yes."

"Great," Heri grinned sarcastically. "Now then. What's a Collections account?"

This earned her fangs bared in amusement.

"Gringotts opens a special account for those that receive a significant amount of donations. It's common practice for many organisations, especially those that rely on charity. For instance, St. Mungo's has one, and anyone who wants to donate money or entire vaults simply file for a transfer to the Collections account."

"So . . ." Honestly, it was like pulling teeth! "Why do I have one?"

"Are you familiar with your standing as the Girl Who Lived, a highly celebrated hero?"

Heri nodded stiffly.

"#782 has been receiving regular deposits every July 31st and October 31st since 1982. Many fervent fans have signed over entire vaults to you on top of the usual trinkets. Since the Potter vaults were effectively frozen, Gringotts arranged for all gifts to be accounted for under a Collections ledger."

Grimbak shifted and gave Heri a pointed look.

"As to be expected, the fee for the upkeep of the account and vault has yet to be taken care of. Gringotts would urge you to settle your debts."

By the gods, could nothing be simple? Heri checked her pocket watch. It was well past lunch by now!

Heri deliberated for a moment, thinking over her options.

"Are any of those houses liveable at the moment?"

"The vacation home in Verona is being rented out and the Potter Estate has been in heavy disrepair since the late Potters went into hiding. Töpferei, Bramblewood Hall, and Leonis House are whole, but the last of the house-elves died several years back and the properties have been neglected since then; we are unaware if taking up residence is advisable."

Hmm, well, it wasn't really a good time to leave England anyway. There wasn't enough of the holidays left to do any kind looking into those places. She'd just have to wait. In any case, it wasn't as if she would know what to do with them even if she did go to check them over. She'd look into the steward thing, but that would likely be it for now.

Heri got to her feet and stretched her legs discreetly.

"Alright. It's obvious that there's not much else I can do besides accept the bloody rings. As soon as everything's active again, I want all the fees to be taken care of, alright? If something needs to be
paid for, it gets paid at once. I don't want anymore of this decade-long tab rubbish."

Grimbak nodded his understanding and summoned an escort for her again. Another goblin — Griphook — took over from there and transported Heri to her vaults via the mining carts.

First she was taken to the Potter Family vault, which was deeper within the tunnels than her trust vault. She was made to put her hand to a blank section on the ornate door to unlock it. A jolt of electricity and a drop of blood later, she was standing in a hall almost as big as the Great Hall at Hogwarts and thrice as decorated.

Amongst the glass pillars filled with gold coins and gems, the shelves of books and weapons, the tables of jars filled with what appeared to be potions ingredients, and all the other odds and ends, there was a pedestal in the very centre of the room. It was waist high with a red velvet cushion on it. As she walked over to it, Heri could see a trio of pale gold rings on the pillow.

Heri leaned in to observe the rings more closely. They were all signet rings and had small gems embedded around the band, but the seal on them were slightly different from each other. She figured that one was for the Head of House, one was for the Lady of the House, and one was for the heir. The problem was that she was technically all three of those things.

"Which one do I wear?" Heri asked Griphook, looking over her shoulder at him where he stood just outside the vault.

"At this point in time, it would suit you best to wear the heir ring, the one with only the heraldic animal on it. While you are Head of your House, your Family Law forbids you from formally claiming dominion until you are sixteen."

He gave her a peeved look, as if scolding her for asking such a stupid question.

Well, Grimbak did tell her the same thing earlier, so Heri supposed Griphook was allowed to be annoyed with her.

Heri picked up the one Griphook referred to and gave it a closer inspection. She had thought it to be some kind of dragon at first, but now that she got a better look, she saw that it was actually a hippocampus, the aquatic horse creature created by Poseidon. Perhaps the Potters before her believed in the Olympians as well.

Pleased despite herself, a small smile touched her lips as she slipped the ring on.

As soon as the ring was snug, a gust of wind surged up, blowing Heri's hair back and fluttering her clothes. The ring became hot as a fire poker and seared the flesh under it. Heri let out a sharp cry of alarm and pain as needles seemed to stab into her chest, head, and what had to be her magic. The fire that burned her finger like a fresh brand flowed through her veins and her skin prickled like glass was digging into her. All the while, she felt like something was tearing into her brain, physically ripping her head open to get to her mind; it was judging her.

Then, just as suddenly as it had started, the pain and power vanished.

Heri found herself on her knees, scrabbling at her forehead with tears trickling down her face. Sweat prickled her brow. By the damned in Tartarus! What had all that been about?

"Congratulations, your ladyship." — Heri looked up and scowled at Griphook at his words — "It appears that the Potter ring has accepted you."
"Thanks for the warning," Heri grumbled, brushing off her knees.

Heri was taken to Black vault soon after.

At first, there was a moment wherein the door seemed uncertain if it was going to allow her in, but it eventually relented. Griphook told her that the hesitance likely came from the fact that her blood was more Potter than anything else, and the Black Family was notoriously picky about the purity of blood. In the end, it was likely because she had traces of Black magic on her that saved her from being attacked; that and the fact that the Black blood within her came from the main family. Not that it mattered much to Heri either way since she was once again sent to her knees from the debilitating pain of being judged by the Black heir ring.

When leaving Gringotts that afternoon to catch a late lunch, Heri wondered if topping off her money pouch had been worth all the trouble it took for her to finally be taken to her trust vault. Her remaining aches voted against it.

Now that Heri had her eyes opened to the reality of her semi-divinity, it was as if the floodgates of her presence had been burst open. Even without knowing she was Heri Potter, eyes followed her, both benign and malicious. She drew people in. But just as much as she received an increased amount of kindness from friendly folk, she also had those of ill-intent making grabs at her. It was both a blessing and a curse.

Heri learned that while Knockturn Alley had been a dangerous place for her to wander before, it was a veritable death-trap now. She only passed by the entrance one day and still she was almost plucked up in broad daylight by a hag. It was through her experience with those that meant to kill her and a gaggle of her newest admirers that she escaped with nothing more than a slimy feeling on her skin.

She made a point to walk on the other side of the road whenever she went down that direction after that.

The Alleys were far more vast than Heri had expected. Hagrid had mentioned other streets when he showed her around, and she of course knew about Vertic, but it took her actually traversing the other Alleys to comprehend the reality of them. She had imagined short cul-de-sacs that branched off of Diagon; what she found was a spiderweb network of Alleys that hosted more than just a shopping district. Diagon, Knockturn, Vertic, Whimsic, Quizzic, Satiric, Casu, and a handful of others. She spent a goodly amount of time just wandering.

That day, Heri was in Whimsic, the Alley that hosted an abundance of enchanters, metal-workers, and body-modification businesses on top of the usual shops and pubs. It wasn't anywhere near as posh as Vertic or even Diagon, but the people were friendly and open. It also appeared to be the most liberal of the Alleys. She wasn't sure why, but she had sort of assumed that the other magical species didn't do much mixing with wizards; Whimsic had all sorts of non-human Beings carrying out their business. She wasn't sure if this was because of purposeful segregation or because the other Alleys just didn't cater to their needs.

Heri was currently in a shop that sold alternatives to wands. The layout was much like that of a jewellery store, all glass-casing and velvet lined shelves. There were two shop attendants that she could see, but one was absorbed in a magazine while the other attended to Heri. It wasn't a large place, maybe a touch bigger than the Dursley's sitting room, but it was well-kept despite its homely feel and there appeared to be a workshop in the back.

"What d'you think of these?" said a chirpy voice to Heri's right.
Heri turned to see sandy-haired girl her age with a riot of freckles holding up what looked to be a pair of decorated hair-sticks.

Mayblossom Marsh was the daughter of a pub-owner that ran a business further down in Whimsic. They had met when Heri popped into The Green Dragon for a quick lunch and Mayblossom tried to deliver the order only to trip over the hem of her skirt and dump the food on Heri's lap. After the babble of loud apologies that drew the attention of not only the other patrons but Mayblossom's parents as well, Heri's was cleaned up and given another platter free of charge.

The two girls had made friends when they bumped into each other again while Heri was browsing the fresh-produce market on the corner where Whimsic met Casu and Mayblossom had been out doing the shopping. Mayblossom was jittery and tended to babble on, but she was endearing and sweet. Heri kept the other girl company while she bartered and it eventually led to them making plans to met up more often.

They ended up shopping for alternative foci when Mayblossom discovered that Heri thought everybody had a wand.

"And I suppose every plain Jane has a bloke on a string just mad for her!" Mayblossom said to such an assumption. "I'd like to live in such a world! Where ever did you get such a thought?"

In confusion, Heri explained how everyone at school had wands as did every other wizard she had met before.

Mayblossom got a strange look on her face before she regarded Heri seriously.

"Do you go to Hogwarts then?"

Heri frowned lightly.

"I do. But why are you asking?"

"Tell me, how many witches and wizards do you think there are in the world?"

"What?" Heri was puzzled at the non sequitur. She thought about it. "Erm, hundreds of thousands, I suppose."

Mayblossom smiled oddly.

"Heri, two percent of the human population is magical. There's about 1.2 million of us here just in the U.K. Out of that number, twenty percent of us are between the ages of eleven and eighteen; that's about 240,000 school kids. How many students go to Hogwarts right now?"

Heri thought for a moment.

"I've been told that the average is four hundred."

"So four hundred out of 240,000 kids. Where do you suppose all the others go to school?"

Heri looked on in disbelief.

"You don't mean to tell me that Hogwarts is the only school and everyone else just goes on without an education!"

Mayblossom waved a hand negligently.
"Of course not! I go to a school down in Margin Alley that specialises in witchery. Top of my class, I am — I make a damn fine potion. My point is that only the cream of the crop have wands and go to Hogwarts — the best of the best! The people with the capability to do all the branches of magic are less than one percent!"

Mayblossom went on to explain that the common witch or wizard usually specialised in only one branch of magic, one that usually ran in the family. Because of this, most saw no reason to purchase a personal wand, especially not a proper one like from Ollivanders that was capable of performing magic of all types. Instead, they stuck to specialised foci, things made to work specific types of magic. They either bought them, made their own, or used ones that had been handed down for generations.

Heri had been intrigued at the notion of specialised foci. Mayblossom indulged Heri's curiosity by showing her around a shop know for its quality.

Heri smiled at Mayblossom and looked over the lengths of decorated wood in her hands.

"Are these supposed to be wands?" Heri took one of the thin sticks. It was much like a chopstick save for the coloured wire coiled at the handle and the polished stone capping the end. It was quite pretty; decorative without being showy. "I thought the point of coming here was to get something besides a wand."

"Well, there's not much point in that, is there?" Mayblossom shrugged. "You already have a wand so anything you might get would be unnecessary anyway. Since it's all the same, why not?"

"A secondary focus would come in handy in a pinch," Heri retorted. "There's nothing unnecessary about it!"

"Oooh, why are so serious all the time?" Mayblossom complained. She reached up and pinned up one side of Heri's hair with the other skinny wand. "Have some fun, you stroppy thing! We already know these will be useful, so why not focus on what will look prettiest on you?"

Heri eventually conceded the point and ended up an assortment of the foci in the form of grips, pins, bracelets, and the like. Most of them were one-use only and disposable, but she figured that if she was attacked again as she was coming to expect to happen, she would always have at least something in reach since it was expected that a girl would wear accessories. The ones that she expected greater use from were the single-purpose wands; she had learned that even though they weren't capable of magic beyond O.W.L.s level they lasted as long as they weren't broken, and they weren't tagged with the Trace like proper wands were either.

Heri got a wand for every purpose the shop had available: transfiguration; charms; divination; offensive magic; defensive magic; healing spells; protective spells; the works. After taking in the sight of herself with her hair pinned up by several wands-turned-hairsticks, she figured that this was an occasion wherein having long, sheep-like curls was actually benefit.

Summer ended with little fanfare.

After asking around for a bit, Heri actually did end up hiring a steward to properly maintain the goings-on of Hautmont and her subsidiaries, but the situation was just as she had thought: her 'constituents' or whatever were being locally governed by elected councils and didn't really need any extra directing. After reassuring them that she wasn't about to just throw their system out the window on a whim, she told the councils to get in touch with her chosen steward — a Mr. Gwaine Bassenthwaite — if they were ever in need of . . . whatever it was that she as their overseer or her
proxy was meant to do. Essentially, she shook some hands and kissed some babies and left the people well enough alone.

After that, she did little more than mill around the Alleys, read up on her optionals, and finish up her school shopping. There had been a singular afternoon wherein the Minister of Magic had found her at The Nightengale's Cage and made a great show of being relieved she was alive — since it came out that she was the likeliest target for that criminal godfather of hers who was on the run (she no longer had it in her to be surprised) — but she counted that as nothing more than a freak blip.

Heri strolled through the length of the train, smoothing down the front of her uniform with a careful hand. It was a new uniform; she had actually done some growing over the summer. Well, the blouse and over-robe were new — her skirts from first year still fit. They were starting to get short though. She would have gotten new skirts as well, but she really didn't have the patience to stand around being measured when what she had still fit.

She had grown noticeably from last year. It seemed that when she wasn't looking her body had decided to start climbing out of childhood. She was still short, but at least she was nearer to five feet than before — the clothier in Diagon said she was now four feet and 9 inches, a whole three inches taller than the last time she measured. She wasn't quite certain, but it looked to her that her hips and bottom had gained width and definition as well. That might have been from the Quidditch training though. If worst came to worst and she grew enough during the year that her skirts became indecent, she'd just visit the clothier in Hogsmeade.

Speaking of growing . . .

Heri slid open door to Marcus' compartment and bounced in. She closed the door with a click and beamed at those within. What remained of last year's Slytherin Quidditch team and reserve were present along with Lucian and Graham, and all were sending her peeved looks for interrupting them during their scheming, but Heri ignored them in favour of her favourite person.

"Marcus! Marcus, look!" Heri cried. She cupped her breasts proudly. "I had to buy new bras this summer! Soon they'll be as big as the ones you ogle on the older girls!"

Her breasts really were the crowning glory of her summer growth-spurt (at least, in her adolescent opinion). Instead of the training camisoles she'd been wearing since she was ten, she now fit into proper bras — the lady at the shop actually said that Heri really should have started wearing them sooner because at the rate she was growing, she'd have full Bs by the end of the school-year.

Marcus' eyes widened in alarm. Unbelievably, his cheeks glowed red as his eyes were drawn by the motion of Heri's hands. He caught one good look before he could stop himself and then promptly buried his face in his hands, muttering about going to Hell.

"HERI!" Lucian exclaimed, bolting up and yanking her arms up (and consequentially removing her hands from her breasts). His head looked like it was about to explode, his face was that red. "What in Merlin's name—?! You can't just—! You don't—! And YOU LOT!" — here he spun around like a mad man and pointed thunderously at the rest of them — "GET YOUR FILTHY EYES OFF HER! WHO THE FUCK SAID YOU COULD KEEP LOOKING?!"

Graham frantically shoved two of the other boys into each other, banging their heads together, and then there was a scrabble of yelps, turning around, and eye-covering.

"Hey!" Heri protested, coming close to a whine. "You could at least tell me if I've gotten prettier first!"
Mind, she didn't usually care, but she had put in some effort today and she wanted her due appreciation, dammit!

Lucian laughed a touch hysterically and hoisted her up like she was a toddler. He then tucked her into his chest and sat her down on his lap.

"You're very pretty, Heri," he said placatingly, still wild-eyed, clutching her to him like cuddle-toy. "You don't need to show us your — your — your assets," he uttered in a horrified whisper. "You've always been pretty! Anyone who says otherwise is an idiot!"

Heri head-butted Lucian's chin to make him loosen up his grip and squinted up at him suspiciously.

"The lady at the shop said I'm cute as a snidget chick, but I'll be a sight to see when my curves grow in," she said. "I asked her what about curves would make me pretty since they seem rather useless unless I wanted to bang them against things by accident or something, and then she said that having a bigger bum and baps meant a girl was becoming a woman and thus acceptable for blokes to think pretty, and that only sick freaks thought little girls were pretty. And, well — I want Marcus to think I'm pretty, but I don't want him to be a sick freak, so I figured if you knew I have those stupid curves now then he can think I'm pretty freely without running the risk of being a sick freak.

"And I already know that Marcus likes curves anyway, so I figured he'd like mine too," she concluded at length.

"Heri . . ." Lucian groaned helplessly, not reacting to the way the others had calmed down a bit and were now sneaking peeks about to what was going on. "There are things . . . there are things you don't do in public or otherwise no matter how sound you think your reasoning is! And presenting your—your feminine attributes is something you don't do!"

"That's not fair!" she protested, banging on his chest with her fists. "The older girls do it all the time! An' some of them cheat with padding and stuff 'cause they don't have much more than I do! Why can they do it but not me?"

"Potter, you're a third-year and Flint's already of-age," another boy chimed in, Adrian Pucey, one of the Chasers on the reserve and a fourth-year. He was peering out from between his fingers warily, still flushed. "You really want to make him a paedophile?"

Marcus growled angrily at Pucey as Heri crossed her arms petulantly.

"Seventeen's hardly grown, Pucey! He can't be a paedophile if he's only four years older than me, an' you can already see I'm no little kid anymore!"

"He's more than a foot taller than you," Graham pointed out, grinning to himself.

"I can't help being short! Don't tell me your size-ist!" Heri turned to Marcus and put on her cutest puppy-eyes. "You don't care if I'm short, do you? I'm growing as fast as I can!"

Marcus groaned painfully, dropping his face back into his hands.

"Come off it, Titch. I told you from the beginning you're too young for me."

Heri made a disgruntled noise and squirmed her way out of Lucian's hold. Ignoring his sighing, she attached herself to Marcus' arm and curled up around it with closed-eye delight.

"I won't be too young forever," she said contentedly, undeterred. "You just watch — I'll grow up
taller an' super pretty an' then you'll definitely stop saying I'm too little! You'll see! You just wait! Um . . ." — A thought occurred to Heri and she looked up hesitantly — "You will wait . . . won't you?"

Marcus made another one of his painful-looking faces, a cross between a grimace and a scowl.

"Marcus?" she prompted after a moment, a trickle of uncertainty finally seeping in.

Maybe he heard it — Marcus immediately put his hand on her head and fluffed her curls affectionately. A wry smirk turned up the corners of his mouth.

"Sure thing, runt. Just don't take forever, yeah?"

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**Heri** was roused from a light doze by the feeling of the train slowing. All within the compartment looked up from what they were doing to check the window. It had been drizzling outside and it looked to be getting heavier.

Lucian frowned and checked his watch.

"We can't be there yet. It's nowhere near the right time."

"So why're we stopping?" said Curtis Urquhart, one of the Chasers.

The train was getting slower and slower. As the noise of the pistons fell away, the wind and rain sounded louder than ever against the windows.

Heri, who had already gotten to her feet again, went to look into the corridor. All along the carriage, other heads were sticking curiously out of their compartments too.

The train came to a stop with a jolt, and distant thuds and bangs told them that luggage had fallen out of the racks. Then, without warning, all the lamps went out and they were plunged into total darkness.

"What's going on?" Peregrine Derrick — one of the Beaters — asked in alarm.

Heri closed the door again but didn't move to sit down.

"Doesn't look like anyone knows. D'you think we've broken down?"

"Dunno . . ."

There was a squeaking sound, and Heri saw the dim black outline of Lucian, wiping a patch clean on the window and peering out.

"There's something moving out there," Lucian said. "It looks people are coming aboard . . ."

"What?" said Heri incredulously. "Doesn't the Hogwarts Express only pick up at King's Cro—?"

The compartment door suddenly opened and someone ran straight into Heri, pitching them both to the floor.

"Sorry — d'you know what's going on? — Ouch — sorry —"

"Hullo, Neville," said Heri, feeling around in the dark and pulling the boy up with her as she got to her feet again.
"Heri? Is that you? What's happening?"

"No idea — here, sit down —"

There was a loud hissing and a yelp of pain; Neville had tried to sit on one of the other boys and stepped on a foot while he was at it.

"Everyone sit down and belt up," Marcus commanded. He cast a light-making spell, prompting the rest of them to do the same. "Vaisey, go ask the conductor what the Hell's going on."

"Why does it have to be me?" Heri heard Vaisey grouse, but he got up all the same and she felt him move past her.

The door slid slowly open before Vaisey could reach it.

Standing in the doorway, illuminated by the shivering flames in Vaisey's hand, was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Its face was completely hidden beneath its hood. Heri's eyes darted downward, and what she saw made her stomach contract. There was a hand protruding from the cloak; glistening, grayish, slimy-looking, and scabbed, like something dead that had decayed in water . . .

But it was visible only for a split second. As though the creature beneath the cloak sensed Heri's gaze, the hand was suddenly withdrawn into the folds of its black cloak. Then the thing beneath the hood, whatever it was, drew a long, slow, rattling breath, as though it were trying to suck something more than air from its surroundings.

An intense cold swept over the compartment. Heri felt her breath catch. The cold went deeper than her skin. It was inside her chest, it was inside her very heart . . .

Heri's vision went black and she felt herself falling. She couldn't see. She was drowning in cold. There was a rushing in her ears as though of water. The roaring grew louder and louder — And then, from far away, she heard screaming, terrible, terrified, pleading screams. She wanted to help whoever it was, she tried to move her arms, but couldn't . . . a thick white fog was swirling around her, inside her —

And then the fog churned and suddenly she was staring into a gaping maw. Closer and closer — she was being eaten alive! No! It was (The sounds of someone stumbling from a room — a door bursting open — a cackle of high-pitched laughter —) swallowing her and it was dark and confining and she couldn't breathe and — War. Towering nightmares and the screams of the wounded. ("Not Heri! Take me instead!") Blood everywhere; on the ground, in the air, washing in with the tide filled with the dead, and then— She was running. She was running ("Stand aside, you foolish girl!") because he was chasing her. A mocking voice echoed from behind ("I told you to move, mudblood!") her, but he would not catch her! He was not worthy! — They were sending her away? Why? No . . . No, don't! She would ("Not Heri! Not my baby! Please — I'll do anything —") be good! Mother, please, I'm sorry! No, I don't want to be alone—! Betrayal. It was all a lie. ("Not Heri! Kill me instead!") They had lied to her! Lied to her! How dare they—?! "Heri! Heri! What's wrong?! Wake up, Heri, please!"

The tempest of anguish lifted enough for Heri to hear the crackling of glass breaking and wood splintering. In the background, there were shrills of screams. ("Mama loves you, Heri. Be strong.") She distantly noted that her own voice was amongst the screaming.
Heri had to be carried off of the train.

When she had come to, the train was moving again and she was bundled up in someone's winter cloak. She had been told that the new D.A.D.A. professor had shown up while the foul beast ("Dementor," Neville had choked out, pale as milk) was looming over her and she was in the throes of a fit and making things explode while the others were taking cover. The professor had ordered them to keep her warm, gave them a bar of chocolate to feed her when she woke up, and told them to make sure she saw the nurse when they reached school. By the time they finally arrived, she was still too shaky to walk by herself.

As Heri was hauled into the castle, they were hailed by Professor McGonagall over the crowd streaming into the school.

"Flint! I want a word with Potter!" She then tacked on, "Granger, a moment with you as well," when she spotted Hermione Granger from Gryffindor.

"What d'you need with Heri?" Graham asked warily when they reached the professor. Professor McGonagall had a way about her that made students feel as if they were constantly on the verge of being in trouble.

"Calm yourself, Montague — I just want a word in my office," she told them. "The rest of you can move along. This discussion won't need a procession."

Professor McGonagall had the remaining three students (including Marcus since he was still carrying Heri) accompany her across the entrance hall, up the marble staircase, and along a corridor.

Once they were in her office, a small room with a large, welcoming fire, Professor McGonagall motioned to the seats. When Marcus settled Heri into a chair, the professor nodded her thanks to him and told him that he was free to return to the Great Hall.

After a comforting stroke to Heri's hair, Marcus retreated.

When it was just the three of them, Professor McGonagall settled herself behind her desk and said abruptly, "Professor Lupin sent an owl ahead to say that you were taken ill on the train, Potter."

Before Heri could reply, there was a soft knock on the door and Madam Pomfrey came bustling in. Heri felt herself flushing on top of how she was still quivering. It was bad enough that she'd reacted so badly with that horrible creature without everyone making all this fuss!

Oh, she was still so cold . . .

"I don't need to be looked at," Heri said. "Really, Professor —"

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Madam Pomfrey, bending down to look closely at Heri. "I suppose you've been doing something dangerous again?"

"It was a dementor, Poppy," said Professor McGonagall.

The two older women exchanged a dark look.

Madam Pomfrey proceeded to look Heri over, clucking disapprovingly when she noted the shaking and hazy eyes.

"Setting dementors around a school," she muttered. "She won't be the last one who collapses. Terrible things, they are, and the effect they have on people who are already delicate —"
"Delicate!" Heri repeated, offended. When had she ever been described as delicate before?

"Hush now, don't work yourself up," said Madam Pomfrey absentmindedly, now taking Heri's pulse.

"What does she need?" said Professor McGonagall crisply. "Bed rest? Should she perhaps spend tonight in the hospital wing?"

"A night in the hospital wing might be just the thing; I'd like to keep her monitored until the shaking stops. She should have some chocolate as well."

"I've already had some, ma'am," said Heri. "Professor Lupin gave me some."

"Did he now?" said Madam Pomfrey approvingly. "So we've finally got a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who knows his remedies. I suppose you're a sight better than you were before then."

After deciding that Heri didn't need immediate medical attention, Professor McGonagall moved on to the real reason Heri and Granger had been summoned.

"Both of you have signed up for an unusual amount of classes. The usual limit on electives are three, but as you two are the top of your class, I petitioned the Ministry of Magic for the use of two Time-Tuners."

Professor McGonagall went on to described how Time-Tuners worked, their limits (twenty-four hours), and how Heri and Granger were absolutely not allowed to let anyone else know that they had the things.

"For your studies only," she told them severely.

While Granger nodded her head solemnly, Heri wondered when giving time-machines to children became more logical than setting up evening and weekend classes. Not that Heri was complaining of course.

There had to be something wrong with Draco Malfoy. On a chemical level, Heri thought. Why else would he walk up to a creature bigger than a horse with the talons and instincts of a bird of prey that had already been explained to take offense at insult and insult it — right within striking distance as well.

It was the first day of classes and Heri had been in a fine mood since the morning. The shakiness that came from dementor exposure was all gone when she woke up, and she had been excited to start with her new classes. She had signed up for arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Care of Magical Creatures, divination, and Ghoul Studies (the last being an extra-curricular class). Before she went to sleep last evening, she had spent a few minutes sketching out how she'd get to her classes and when she'd do homework. It was with great relief that she came to the conclusion that if she used the Time-Tuner as she had first thought to, she would have no trouble getting in work, sleep, and play between lessons — indeed she'd actually have lots of spare time.

Her first class of the day had been divination, and it had proved to be as interesting though bewildering as she had been expecting. Professor Trelawney had been a masterpiece of showmanship, and even though Heri took her warning of deathly danger with more levity than what was likely appropriate, she thought the woman did a fair job of teaching her subject.

Heri's contentment lasted right up to Care of Magical Creatures.
As soon as the announcement came that Hagrid would be teaching CoMC, Heri knew the lesson would be on something impressive. Lo and behold, she was correct, and the class was greeted by the most magnificent creatures she had ever seen, doubly so because they weren't trying to kill her. Hippogriffs: Creatures with the head and foreparts of an eagle and the hindquarters of a horse.

When Hagrid asked for a volunteer, Heri didn't hesitate.

Heri and the hippogriff named Buckbeak had exchanged cordial bows, taken a short flight around the docks together, and had landed amongst the embolden class when Malfoy decided it was high time that he made an arse of himself.

As the others spread out amongst the other hippogriffs around, Malfoy decided on Buckbeak. While Heri still stood at Buckbeak's shoulder, he had approached the proud avian the same way Heri had.

And then he went and shot himself in the foot.

"I knew it must have been easy if Potter could do it. I bet you're not dangerous at all, are you?" Malfoy said to Buckbeak. "Are you, you great ugly brute?"

It happened in a flash of steely talons; Malfoy let out a high-pitched scream and next moment, Heri had tackled him to the ground while Hagrid was wresting Buckbeak back into his collar. Malfoy and Heri laid curled in the grass, blood blossoming over their robes.

"I'm dying!" Malfoy yelled as the class panicked. "I'm dying, look at me! It's killed me!"

"Are you a complete idiot?" Heri roared, startling Malfoy from his shrieking. She got up and wrapped her arms around her middle. Though Malfoy was clutching his forearm, it was obvious now that the majority of blood was actually coming from Heri.

Heri pinned him with a furious look.

"Professor Hagrid told us they take offense easily, and you just insult one to its face? Do you have a death wish? If you want to die, Malfoy, there are easier ways of going about it!"

It was then that shock had worn off enough for the other students to react.

"Heri, oh my goodness, we need to get you to Madam Pomfrey!" wailed Megan.

Heri's friends surged forward and hovered frantically. Heri's robe was pulled aside to reveal a slash in her shirt from her hip to shoulder blade. The material was soaked down the side with blood and was dripping down her skirt.

The adrenaline drained out of Heri's system and she slumped into Hannah's side.

"I don't know how deep it is but I doubt it'll kill me," she assured them in a tiny voice. "No one else got hurt, right? None of the other hippogriffs spooked?"

Hagrid was then hoisting her up and cradling her like an infant.

"Let's get yeh to the hospital wing," he said in upset tones. He then glared down at where Malfoy was being fawned over by Parkinson. "Malfoy. Yer comin' too. Fifty points from Slytherin fer ignorin' instructions and causin' injury to 'nother student. I don' think I have to tell yeh that I'll be takin' this up with the headmaster."
The paleness of Malfoy's face when he heard his sentence detracted from Heri's pronouncement of him having a death wish. He was stupid, but she supposed there was some self-preservation in there.

"Why did you save me?" Malfoy asked later when Madam Pomfrey had finished patching them up. His tone was as accusatory as it was confused.

Heri had looked at him with all the scorn for his intelligence that she held.

"I don't like you, Malfoy. I've tried being civil, but you regularly try to pick a fight and make a scene. You're rude, conceited, prejudice, cowardly, and an awful bully.

"But," she continued when the boy grew red with anger, "never once have I wished you dead. You're a thuggish brat, but that's not exactly a hanging offense. You are someone's friend and you are someone's son. I don't agree with how you were raised, but it's obvious your parents love you very much. I might end up disliking them as much as I do you if I were to ever meet them, but I wouldn't let their boy die if there was something I could do to prevent it."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"No matter how much a hideous, horrendous, little haemorrhoid on the arse-end of society that boy is."

Heri ducked an arrow and flung herself down into a roll. Sweat trickled down her back and she panting shallowly for breath. She swung around a tree and sprinted back in the direction she came, forcing her attacker to stumble back to keep balance.

Her bare feet pounded the earth as she darted from tree to tree, using them as cover. Another whizzed by her ear. She cursed and barrel-rolled into the thick underbrush.

As she crawled out on the other side, a heavy hoof stamped the ground in front of her face.

Heri groaned and glowered up at the stern visage of Bane, her most stringent instructor.

"With such feeble evasive manoeuvres, I wonder how you've managed to survive this long."

"Come now, Bane," another voice added. Firenze trotted up, his bow over his shoulder. "It has been a good twenty minutes. You give her too little credit; you know she was injured today."

Bane snorted disdainfully.

"A mere twenty minutes, you mean. And that injury was healed in a thrice by their healer. Get up," he directed to Heri. "We are nowhere near finished yet."

Heri huffed but climbed back on to her feet.

"I thought you were going to teach me how to fight and kill monsters," she said, combing out leaves from her hair. She was dressed in the bare necessities, just her undershirt and the shorts she wore under her skirt. Everything else — her robe, uniform, shoes, and hair-wands — had been left behind Hagrid's hut for safe-keeping.

Bane sent her an uncompromising look.

"To defend yourself from creatures that mean you harm, you must first be able to get yourself in a
position where you are not in striking distance. You must be able to evade."

Heri spent the rest of the evening before curfew getting herself boxed into a corner again and again. It was exhausting and infuriating but at least she could tell she was getting better. When the lesson finished for the evening, she even managed a thank you that was actually half-sincere.

Before she went to sleep that night, Heri threw her invisibility cloak over herself, padded down to the common room to the nook at the base of the stairs, and pulled out her Time-Turner. She gave the bauble twenty-four quick turns. When it was once again the night before the first day of classes, Heri crept back up the stairs to sleep in the bed left conveniently open by her younger self spending the night in the hospital wing. She'd have to find a different place to sleep the next day, but for now, she was too tired to think about it. Tomorrow, she would do her second schedule of the day.

Heri reread the notes she had written up during arithmancy, checking to make sure they were understandable enough that the people that begged tutoring off of her would have little trouble understanding them.

—

**Numbers 1-9:**

1: Beginning, independence, innovation, leadership

2: Harmony, unity, relationships, collaboration

3: Imagination, positivism, playfulness, creative expression

4: Building, formation, hard work, endurance, sober-mindedness, practicality

5: Change, transition, progressive thinking, resourcefulness, freedom, versatility

6: Balance, nurturing, service-oriented, responsibility/duty, family focus, domestic and work issues

7: Analysis, research, solitude, wisdom, spiritual focus, investigative, mystical

8: Authority, finances, business, success, material wealth, organization, self-mastery

9: Endings, tolerance, metamorphosis, cosmic, teaching, global awareness, perfection

**Master Numbers:**

11: Master of Illumination, the inspirational messenger, the number of light; one who raises the consciousness, reformer of world problems, wants to uplift others, inspires by teaching own truth

22: Master Builder, visionary; knows how to plan and execute large projects; wants to further consciousness of humankind; the humanitarian

33: Teacher of Teachers, master of compassion, master of healing through love, use of creative energies to serve others

**Karmic Numbers:**
Renewal rebirth, karmic completion, master, beginning again with consciousness

Reworking karmic laziness through discipline

Remedying karmic abuse of freedom through order and stability

Remedying karmic abuse of responsibility and love through spiritual rebirth

Reworking karmic abuse of power through learning to show compassion and sacred use of cosmic wisdom for the greater good

Well, it looked simple enough. Maybe she'd ask one of the fifth-years if there was anything she needed to tweak . . .

"A Shrinking Solution? Really? Why don't we ever learn any of the fun stuff?" said Heri suddenly, breaking the silence when she finally reached the potions portion of her homework. She had worked through her shorter assignments already and hadn't been looking forward to what Professor Snape had assigned them.

Heri frowned down at the brewing instruction for the Shrinking Solution. Juice two shrivelfigs and use the juice as the potion base. Slowly increase the heat to a simmer while stirring gently. Add four finely minced daisy roots and five sliced caterpillars and increase the heat until the potion turns red. Add one tincture of well-shaken wormwood and stir clockwise vigorously until the potion turns yellow. Juice four leeches directly into the potion and stir anti-clockwise slowly for five counts until the potion turns purple. Shake one rat spleen and add it in along a splash of cowbane. Finally, let it boil on a high temperature. If done correctly, it should end up a bright, acid green.

Heri made a face at thought of touching entrails, especially one from a rat.

Megan tittered.

"Somehow, I can't imagine Professor Snape making 'fun' a priority."

Heri and the girls were holed up in Myrtle's lavatory, working on the homework they had been assigned that day. Normally, they would work in the common room or library or out on the grounds, with the boys with them as well, but Wayne had detention with Professor Snape, and Zacharias and Ernie were putting off their homework to spy on the Ravenclaw Quidditch practice instead. The girls had chosen Myrtle's loo because it was a safe place to work on brewing — that and it excited the other girls to be so near the Chamber of Secrets.

It was a month and a half into the school year and already Heri was fed up with what they were learning. It wasn't that she thought it was unimportant, it was just that the subject matter was rarely something that had everyday use. Shrinking Solution, really? When would she ever need to have a living thing de-aged to infancy and shrunk down to the size of an action figure? And that was just potions; the other core classes were just as superfluous.

Heri was going through a textbook that hadn't been on the book-list that year. It was called Which Way's Witch and it was one of the books Mayblossom had mentioned learning from. It was pretty old-fashioned in mind-set by the standards Heri had grown up with, but it made up for its gender-biased instructing by being a potions book with far more interesting recipes than the one Hogwarts used.
"See?" Heri said. "This one gives you the voice of whatever person you choose for three hours! And this one here — it's put in water and makes it taste like the favourite drink of whoever tastes it! I haven't seen a mention of rat spleens or caterpillars even once in this book."

"Maybe we ought to transfer to that school your friend goes to," said Sally-Anne from where she sat on the counter of the sinks. She swung her legs idly as she looked over her parchment. "I much prefer what they teach over there over what Snape has us doing here."

Hannah looked up from the potion she was working on on the floor and scoffed at Sally-Anne.

"Oh, there's a brilliant plan: toss out a quality education that others would kill for to enroll in a second-rate school that peaks at O.W.L.s level. Why didn't I think of it before?"

Heri smiled wryly.

"Claws in, kitty-cat," she said in response to Hannah when Megan giggled and Sally-Anne looked ready to snipe back. "You know quite well that you'd throw a party if Professor Snape turned in his resignation. If Sally-Anne wants to dream of running off to parts unknown, she's has every right to dream."

Hannah rolled her eyes but conceded the point.

There was silence for a few moments save for the scratching of quill on parchment, the flicking of pages turning, and the bass rumble of potions boiling.

Heri gave the brewing instructions another glower before tossing aside the notes she had on the Solution with a huff. Brewing it wasn't a priority any way, they were going to make it in class the next day all the same; they had only thought to work ahead so they wouldn't be troubled during class.

"Are you alright, Heri?" Hannah said suddenly.

Heri startled lightly. She looked up to see her friends looking at her with concern.

"What do you mean?" said Heri.

Hannah hesitated and looked to the other two for support.

"It's just . . ." she began. "You've seem so agitated since school started."

Megan nodded.

"It's like you keep expecting something bad to happen."

Sally-Anne scoffed and flipped her hair.

"Of course she's worried something might happen — that Sirius Black bloke has it out for her!"

Megan scowled.

"Oh? Then why're you so concerned as well?"

"It's called caring for your friends. Just because I understand doesn't mean I'm not still worried!"

"Enough with the bickering already," Hannah said sharply. 
Megan and Sally-Anne stopped but sent her pointed looks.

Hannah sighed and turned back to Heri.

"We're just worried, you know? I've never actually seen you get angry before until that Care lesson with Malfoy."

Heri looked confused.

"I'm fairly certain that I proved how angry I could be when I smashed his face the year before."

"That was different," Hannah contradicted. "You weren't worked up when you did that. It was like you were just batting aside a fly. You weren't actually angry when you did it."

"Yeah," Megan chimed in. "I didn't know your face could actually do angry."

Heri sighed and tugged at a loose curl.

"I dunno really. Things just bother more lately. I get fed up quicker. Even I have a limit, y'know? I don't get why so many people seem to think I've an infinite well of patience."

"Hormones," Sally-Anne declared sagely. "We're at that age so it makes sense."

Heri snorted.

"Wish I could turn it off then. Being angry is exhausting."

**Halloween** came with as much excitement and trouble as it did every year since Heri had started Hogwarts. Despite the fact the day had been made fantastic by the fact that it was the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year, she could now say that it was tradition for things to go tits up when October 31st came rolling in. This year, Sirius Black made his presence known by slashing the portrait guardian of Gryffindor House, thoroughly traumatising the inhabitant of the portrait.

There had been a bit of a panic when the battered portrait was discovered and that panic escalated when they couldn't locate Heri afterwards while they were gathering the students to sleep in the Great Hall. Fortunately for the professors' blood pressures, Heri was found shortly after when she wandered back up from Sir Nicholas' Death-day party — where she had been doing hands on research for her Ghoul Studies class — with Myrtle chattering her ear off about the latest gossip.

The professors would stay vigilant for the rest of the night as they searched the grounds, but nothing came of it in the end. Classes were carried out as usual, but everyone was confused why Sirius Black had tried to break into the Gryffindor common room when it wasn't a secret that Heri was a Hufflepuff.

For a good week before the first Quidditch match of the year, the weather had been almost biblical with its thundering and pouring. In a plot that was quite like them, the Slytherin team had weaselled out of playing and shoved Hufflepuff to take their place against Gryffindor. Cedric Diggory, their new captain, was none too pleased. As much as Heri adored Marcus, even she couldn't help but glower at him when she trudged in from having to practice twice as hard in gale-force winds.

The conditions on the day of was ridiculous. Such was the popularity of Quidditch that the whole school turned out to watch the match as usual, but they ran down the lawns toward the Quidditch
field, heads bowed against the ferocious wind, umbrellas being whipped out of their hands as they went. The wind was so strong that the player staggered sideways as they walked out onto the field. If the crowd was cheering, it couldn't be heard it over the fresh rolls of thunder.

Within five minutes of kick-off, they were all soaked through and frozen to the bone. The sky kept getting darker, as though night had decided to come early. It was only her enhanced eye-sight that kept Heri from crashing into other players like everyone else was, and even then the rain still got in her eyes. The random flashes of lightning weren't helping either.

She turned, intending to head back toward the middle of the field where Cohen was fending off one of the Weasley twins, but at that moment another flash of lightning illuminated the stands and Heri saw something that distracted her completely: the silhouette of an enormous shaggy black dog, clearly imprinted against the sky, motionless in the topmost, empty row of seats.

Wasn't that . . .? Didn't Professor Trelawney say—?

Then something odd happened. An eerie silence fell across the stadium. The wind, though as strong as ever, was oddly silent. It was as though someone had turned off the sound, as though Heri had gone suddenly deaf — what was going on? And then a horribly familiar wave of cold swept over her, inside her, just as she became aware of something moving on the field below.

At least a hundred dementors, their hidden faces pointing up, were standing beneath her.

Heri didn't hear the screams of the on-lookers when she slipped off her broom, she was lost to nightmares that tore into her when those cloaked devils surged up as if to receive her. She didn't feel anything when she was caught in a levitation spell that prevented from her cracking her head open but did nothing to impede the dementors from touching her. She was swallowed in the screams of the dying as those wretched wraiths converged on her.

Considering the reaction it could have caused, it might have been a good thing that the swarm of dementors prevented anyone from seeing the way Heri dissolved into a cloud of grey smoke in their midst.

When Heri recovered from the ordeal at the Quidditch match and was once again fit enough to satisfy Bane, she was back in the Forbidden Forest.

Her phantom form — as Firenze and Bane called it — proved to be supremely useful for all the evading Bane insisted she did. They had discovered that she was intangible to physical touch, though they weren't certain if that trait also included magical touch as well. Still, it was damn useful. There appeared to be three stages of it: corporeal — where she was merely intangible — semi-corporeal — wherein she was like a ghost in that she became translucent, colourless, and weightless — and mist — where she was a cloud of fog; the last form had the added benefit of swift travel as well.

After they had tested the limits of her new ability, and he was satisfied that she was equipped well enough to not get pinned, Bane chucked a bow and quiver at Heri; she would now help them control the acromantula population.

Two weeks before the end of the term, the sky lightened suddenly to a dazzling, opaline white and the muddy grounds were revealed one morning covered in glittering frost. Inside the castle, there was a buzz of Christmas in the air. Professor Flitwick had already decorated his classroom with shimmering lights that turned out to be real, fluttering fairies.
The students were all happily discussing their plans for the holidays. Zacharias, Ernie, Hannah, and Wayne would be returning home, but Megan and Sally-Anne had decided to stay. Hannah had initially bounced back and forth between going and staying, but she eventually decided to go when her mother wrote and told her that they were going to host a Christmas party.

To the elation of everyone, another Hogsmeade weekend had been scheduled for the last day of term.

Despite the fact that nothing had happened the last Hogsmeade weekend, the teachers were unhappy at letting Heri go. They had been paranoid since Halloween, understandably so, of course. Not to mention her problem with the dementors. Still, her broom had been blown into the Whomping Willow when she fell from it and it was completely demolished; she needed to place an order for a new one and she could only do so in Hogsmeade.

As Heri was trotting toward the Entrance Hall to meet up with her friends, she was waylaid by Fred and George. The two boys sprang out from a tapestry, hoisted her up between them, and scurried back behind the tapestry before she knew what was going on. A few moments in the dark passageway led them through a secret entrance to one of the empty classrooms a floor up.

"Early Christmas present for you, Heri," said Fred as they put her down again. He pulled something from inside his cloak with a flourish and laid it on one of the desks. It was a large, square, very worn piece of parchment with nothing written on it.

Heri, suspecting one of Fred and George's jokes, stared at it.

"What's that supposed to be?"

"I see you don't remember it. This, Miss Potter, is the secret of our success," said George, patting the parchment fondly.

"It's a wrench, giving it to you," said Fred, "but we decided last night, your need's greater than ours."

"Anyway, we know it by heart," said George. "We bequeath it to you. We don't really need it anymore."

"And what do I need with a bit of old parchment?" said Heri, her tone as dubious as her expression.

"A bit of old parchment!" said Fred, closing his eyes with a grimace as though Heri had mortally offended him. "Explain, George."

"Well . . . when we were in our first year, Heri — young, carefree, and innocent —"

Heri snorted. She doubted that had been a time when Fred and George were innocent.

"— well, more innocent than we are now — we got into a spot of bother with Filch."

"So he hauled us off to his office and started threatening us with the usual —"

"— detention —"

"— disembowelment —"

"— and we couldn't help noticing a drawer in one of his filing cabinets marked Confiscated and
Highly Dangerous."

Heri groaned.

"Don't tell me . . ." She couldn't help the grin growing on her face.

They went on to detail how they managed to nick the thing from Filch — strategic Dungbombing — and expounded on how it had changed their lives.

"You're winding me up," said Heri, hands on hips, eyeing the ragged old bit of parchment.

"Oh, are we?" said George. He took out his wand, touched the parchment lightly, and said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

At once, thin ink lines began to spread like a spider's web from the point that George's wand had touched. They joined each other, they crisscrossed, they fanned into every corner of the parchment; then words began to blossom across the top, great, curly green words, that proclaimed:

Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs,

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers,

are proud to present

THE MARAUDER'S MAP

It was a map showing every detail of the Hogwarts castle and grounds. But the truly remarkable thing were the tiny ink dots moving around it, each labelled with a name in minuscule writing.

Astounded, Heri bent over it. A labelled dot in the top left corner showed that Professor Dumbledore was pacing his study; the caretaker's cat, Mrs. Norris, was prowling the second floor; and Peeves was currently bouncing around the trophy room.

"And you're giving this to me?" breathed Heri, looking up again.

"Well, you know . . ." said Fred, shrugging his shoulders but looking a bit awkward.

George looked at her seriously.

"It's just . . . with Sirius Black on the prowl, it's not safe for you to be wandering about without a clue. This way you'll be able to keep an eye out."

Oh, these two . . . Heri's heart clenched. That they were so concerned for her . . . She couldn't help but hug the life out of them.

"Right," said George briskly, patting her fondly on the head. "Don't forget to wipe it after you've used it —"

"— or anyone can read it," Fred continued warningly.

"Just tap it again and say, 'Mischief managed!' And it'll go blank."

"So, Miss Potter," said Fred, in an uncanny impersonation of Percy. "Mind you behave yourself."

They escorted Heri to where her friends were waiting and left to go meet up with their own after giving her knowing winks. Heri's friends brushed it off as the eccentricity inherent to the twins and
left it at that.

Heri sighed heavily through her nose, the air expelled freezing as it went, making her resemble a dragon as it snorted smoke in warning. It was Christmas day, nearly lunchtime, and she was outside by the lake, sitting on a large boulder that was at the top of a large pile-up of stones. It was a good seven feet off the ground and a popular place for the older years to hang out. Heri was there that day because she needed to get out of the Castle.

"Oh, but, Heri—" Megan had begun to protest when Heri had excused herself.

Sally-Anne had hushed Megan with a pointed looked and tugged her along. Sally-Anne was the one that was the most sensitive to Heri's mood; she knew when Heri wasn't up to humouring a tag-along. It was decided that the two of them would remain inside for the festivities while Heri pulled herself back into a temperament that was suited for public appearance.

It wasn't Heri's way to be a Grumpy Gus, especially during parties or celebrations, but there was just no hiding her discontent at the moment.

She had received a Firebolt among her gifts that year, a Firebolt being an internationally recognised racing broom, the best broom currently on the market, the one that the professional league swore by. Megan had all but fainted when she saw it; her older sister had been raving about it when it first came out. Even Sally-Anne — the one notorious for her lack of appreciation for Quidditch — was mightily impressed. Naturally, they had went down to Christmas breakfast giddy with excitement, over the moon and ecstatic to show Professor Sprout; she had concerns that Heri wouldn't get a new broom in time for Hufflepuffs next match and would be relegated to one of the school brooms which were iffy at best.

All that excitement got shot to hell when the professors learned the Firebolt came without a note.

So what if it came without a note? She got dozens of anonymous gifts year round and they never made anything of those! And did they really think that Sirius Black was able to just walk into a sporting goods shop without any fuss? Why would he waste money on a broom worth more than all seven of the Nimbus 2001s that Malfoy had bribed his way onto the team with if he was going to buy a broom to jinx anyway?

But none of those protest made a difference — Heri's Firebolt was confiscated for checking before she could even get one ride in.

This Sirius Black business and all the paranoia that came with it was really starting to infuriate her.

As if summoned by Heri's ire, Hedwig came flying out of nowhere and landed beside her.

"Hedwig." Heri blinked. "Happy Christmas. What are you doing out here?"

"Hedwig." Heri blinked. "Happy Christmas. What are you doing out here?"

Hedwig spent most of her time either terrorising the owls in the owlery that she had turned into her acolytes or terrorising the denizens of the Forbidden Forest that she tormented like a wicked deity. Heri had yet to need to send out any letters during the school year, so Hedwig was largely free to do whatever she wanted. Provided she didn't kill anything important of course.

Today, Hedwig was a parakeet, and she looked as out of place as . . . well, as out of place as a tropical bird in Scotland during the winter. She fluttered her wings importantly and stuck out one of her legs.
Nonplussed, Heri saw that there was a letter tied to Hedwig's leg.

There were several questions that could be asked at this time, but the most important in Heri's opinion was, "Someone approached a parakeet to deliver a letter?"

Hedwig's warble was not an answer.

Not knowing what else to do, Heri retrieved the letter and opened it.

——

Dear Heri,

A Shuffling Whipplestumper has brought it to my attention that you're bothered by something. I don't know exactly what that something is, of course, but I thought a letter might make you feel better all the same. I would come in person but Daddy and I are in Newfoundland, looking for Muddy Prizzicks.

I hope you liked the bracelet to keep away Nargles I made you for Christmas. I used the prettiest bottle-caps I could find, you know. I would have made you a necklace, but I think a bracelet suits you better.

Hope you feel better,

Luna

P.S. Whenever I'm feeling gloomy, I like to knit. Daddy calls it a ladylike hobby. It's a habit that runs through Mummy's family, you see. I thought maybe you'd like to take up needlework as well, since I find it very soothing.

——

The envelope Luna's letter came in appeared to be expanded on the inside. Carefully sticking her hand in, Heri pulled out sturdy white handkerchief set within an embroidery hoop. There was a faint outline of a flower in the cloth and a threaded needle was tucked into the side of the hoop.

Heri stared at the readied handkerchief with no little bemusement. How Luna knew Heri needed cheering up, Heri would never know. Still, it was very sweet of her.

Not seeing any reason not to, Heri began making tiny stitches along the flower outline.

——

If there was one person that Hermione Granger could say with confidence that she hated, it was Heri Potter.

Ever since first year, Potter had been showing Hermione up in one way or another. If she wasn't being acclaimed as a transfiguration prodigy, she was turning in homework of a quality that Hermione slaved away for hours to research and write up while still having loads of time to goof around with her friends and being a general Queen Bee. It was so unfair! Hermione worked so much harder at being the top of the class and yet Potter just breezed through with nary a sweat.

And she was on the Quidditch team.

And she was pretty.

How was it possible for a person to be smart, sporty, and attractive? Hermione had comforted
herself all her younger years that it was only the lucky few that could manage two out of three! And then she arrived at Hogwarts where being two out of those three things was commonplace, and there were plenty of students — boys and girls — that managed all three: Cho Chang, the Weasley twins, Katie Bell, Cedric Diggory, Roger Davis, Lucian Bole, and Fay Dunbar just to name a few. And Heri Potter was at the top of the list. It was enough to drive someone insane.

Hermione had thought she'd get a leg up on academics by getting a Time-Tuners to attend all the electives as well as core classes, but it was like Potter was always one step ahead. Potter had received a Time-Turner as well, was taking just as many classes as Hermione. This might not have been so frustrating if it wasn't for the fact that Hermione was scrabbling to get all her assignments done on time while squeezing in sleep and eating whenever she could manage, but from all appearances Potter wasn't having a lick of trouble at all, she was seen just as often relaxing with her friends without cracking open a book as the years before.

It was so unfair! Hermione studied for more than an hour before every class, going over theories, the arithmetic calculations, the wand movements, but she was never praised the way Potter was. Oh, sure, she gained loads of points for Gryffindor and none of the professors had anything bad to say about her work, but Hermione doubted she'd ever gain the level of affection they all seemed to have for the other girl.

It wasn't just the professors that loved Potter either, the girl had friends in every House, never mind her fans. She had theoretical discussions with the Lovegood girl and the sycophants in Ravenclaw; she had wrapped the Slytherins around her little finger so thoroughly that it was only blood-supremacist bullies like Malfoy and Parkinson that disliked her; it didn't even needed to be said that Gryffindors adored her, the Weasleys treated her like family, and the girls in the years above and bellow couldn't get enough of talking primping with her.

Hermione was forever on the end of a nagging from Lavender and Parvati about doing something about her frizzy curls, but Potter — whose hair was just as untamed, albeit without the frizz — was fawned over for her thick hair that she recently started pinning up with those hair-sticks.

"Where do you get your accessories?" Lavender had asked, that ridiculous pouting look on her face that made the boys in their year go stupid.

"Just here and there," Potter had replied, shrugging as if it was of little consequence, a coy look on her face that made the boys just as stupid as when Lavender was prancing about. "A friend of mine took me shopping during the summer and we picked up quite a haul. You should come around and see all the cute clips and pins I picked up. I have a few that would look perfect on you."

That was one of the top students in their year. That frivolous bobble-head more concerned about looking good and having fun than learning was Hermione's scholarly rival. It boggled the mind.

She was just as frivolous and flighty in classes too. Just the other day, in Ancient Runes, Potter had finished the assignment — a runic crossword puzzle — early, and decided to show off for her friends. It was like she couldn't be bothered that others were still working and needed quiet to think! They were technically allowed to discuss the questions with their neighbours, but really, it was so obvious that Professor Babbling wanted them to do it by themselves.

Really. It didn't matter that the professor never scolded anyone for talking.

"Fehu is cattle, or money, or wealth!" Potter had sang, drawing the rune in the air with coloured mist. The rune then shifted into a herd of animals. "Uruz is aurochs of strength and of health!," — another rune; another representation — "Thurizas' prickly, a thorn or a thurs;/ Ansuz is Odin, a mouth, or a verse."
Potter's entire song went along this vein: stating the rune and giving it a basic, easy to remember definition. With every Rune that she drew, images churned out, dancing in the air.

Her friends were enthralled.

"Raido is riding so tiring and long;/ Kenaz, a torch burning brightly and strong;/ Gebo’s a gift, an exchange, an award;/ Wunjo is joy, sweet contentment's reward./

"Hagalaz, hail both harmful and good;/ Naudhiz, our need, helps up learn what we should;/ Isa, ice deadly, a danger unknown;/ Jera, the year, we will reap what we've sown./

"Eiwa, the yew, reaches into the skies;/ Algiz, the elk-sedge, is foeman's demise;/ Perthro, the dice cup, is wyrd, luck, or fate;/ Sowilo, the sun, circles ever so great./

"Teiwaz is Tyr bringing justice and right;/ Berkana, the birch, is fertility's might;/ Ehwaz, the horse, is your partner and friend;/ Mannaz is people with lives that will end./

"Laguz, the lake, is both treacherous and deep;/ Inguz, the elk-sedge, is foeman's demise;/ Othala, sweet home, is our ancestral right;/ Dagaz, the daybreak, turns darkness to light."

"Well done, Potter!" Professor Babbling had said in her raspy voice. "Five points to Hufflepuff for creative learning methods."

Potter had turned an ancient, sacred language used in magical practices for over a thousand years into a primary school nursery rhyme. And she had been praised for it.

Hermione couldn't stand it! She hated Heri Potter, hated everything about the girl! She hated—!

"Granger?"

Hermione looked up with a start. It was Potter, Abbot, and Macmillan.

"What is it?" said Hermione, her tone wary.

She was in Ancient Runes again, her last class of the day. Hermione would have been eager to get through the lesson and then be able to jump on her homework, but Professor Babbling had just assigned a group project and had told them to get into groups of four. All of Hermione's primary school misery at not having friends to group up with came rushing back.

Why? Professor Babbling had never assigned a group project before! Why suddenly in the last term?

She had just been about to ask the professor if she could do the assignment by herself when the root of all her current academic misery reared her hatefully beautiful head.

Potter cocked her head and smiled pleasantly at Hermione.

"Want to join our group for the project? Ron's told me you're amazing in runes."

Did she just . . . ?

Tears of awe and relief prickled Hermione's eyes.

"Yes, thank you," she croaked. "I'd love to."

Hermione Granger loved Heri Potter. She loved the other girl with all the piety of a heretic just
Something whooshed suddenly out of the end of Heri's wand — it looked like a wisp of silvery gas.

"Did you see that?" said Heri excitedly. "Something happened!"

When classes started again after the winter holiday, Heri had sought out Professor Lupin for anti-dementor lessons. She had talked to him about them before, but he was too busy at the time. Fortunately, his schedule had cleared up and he now had time to teach her the spell he had used on the train to drive away the dementors.

They were in the History of Magic classroom, and Professor Lupin had brought a boggart in a locked trunk. They, of course, couldn't work with a real dementor, but the professor concluded that a boggart-dementor would better suit their purpose.

"Very good," said Professor Lupin, smiling. "Right, then — ready to try it on a dementor?"

The first few times against the boggart-dementor failed miserably. Though it wasn't as potent as a true dementor, the boggart was still very convincing. Heri ended on the floor both times, tears running down her face and shudders racking her form.

Professor Lupin looked terribly guilty.

"Listen, Heri — perhaps we should leave it here for tonight. This charm is ridiculously advanced. . . . I shouldn't have suggested putting you through this. . . ."

"No!" said Heri. She got up again. "Please, sir, I must be just doing something wrong! I'm not thinking of happy enough things, that's what it is. . . . Hang on. . . ." She racked her brains. A really, really happy memory . . . one that she could turn into a good, strong Patronus . . .

The moment when she'd first found out she was a witch, and would be leaving the Dursleys for Hogwarts! If that wasn't a happy memory, she didn't know what was. Concentrating very hard on how she had felt when she'd realised she'd be leaving Privet Drive, Heri got to her feet and faced the packing case once more.

"Ready?" said Professor Lupin, who looked as though he were doing this against his better judgment. "Concentrating hard? All right — go!"

He pulled off the lid of the case for the third time, and the dementor rose out of it — the room fell cold and dark —

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Heri bellowed.

The screaming and flashes of images inside Heri's head had started again — except this time, it was as though it were coming from a badly cabled television — softer and louder and softer again — and she could still see the dementor — it had halted — and then a huge, silver shadow came bursting out of the end of Heri's wand, to hover between her and the dementor, and though Harry's legs felt like water, she was still on her feet — though for how much longer, she wasn't sure —

"Riddikulus!" roared Professor Lupin, springing forward.

There was a loud crack, and Heri's cloudy Patronus vanished along with the dementor. She sank into a chair, feeling as exhausted as if she'd just run a mile, and felt her legs shaking. Out of the
corner of her eye, she saw Professor Lupin forcing the boggart back into the packing case with his wand; it had turned into a silvery orb.

"Excellent!" Lupin said, striding over to where Heri sat. "Excellent, Heri! That was definitely a start!"

The praise was welcomed, as were the obvious results. They ended the lesson there with an agreement that they would continue at a later date.

Sirius Black was spotted again, this time actually in the Gryffindor dorms. The word was that he was slashing open Ron's bed-curtains when the boy woke up the tower with his screams. And, to make things worse, he had escaped again.

Professor McGonagall had torn into their new portrait guardian when he told her that he had let Black in, and just about murdered Neville when she found out that he had left out a list of the passwords the portrait guardian would use. Neville had come sniffling to Heri when it came about that the other Gryffindors were snubbing him again because they were angry with him and because Professor McGonagall had ordered them to not tell Neville the password anymore. Heri could understand her reasoning, but as she comforted Neville in his misery, she couldn't help but think that the Professor was being too harsh.

Professor McGonagall was not the only professor that amped up House security. Though Black seemed fixated on Gryffindor, all Heads of House circled the wagons. No one was allowed to go anywhere without at least two other people accompanying them. Now, this might not have bothered Heri if it wasn't for the fact that it came about that she couldn't go anywhere without all six of her friends and a prefect to boot. And even with that, her friends picked up on their hovering. If it wasn't for her invisibility cloak and Time-Tuner, she wouldn't have had a moment's peace.

Heri jabbed her needle furiously into the soft cloth she was embroidering and hissed when she pricked her thumb. She stuck the wounded appendage into her mouth and glowered at the now blood-dotted handkerchief.

"If you are quite done with doing yourself injury," said Firenze, trotted up into the clearing they trained in. "We're patrolling the western edge today."

Sighing, Heri took up her bow.

Granger had been on the verge of cracking since that lesson with Professor Trelawney when the old bird told her that she didn't have the talent for it. She had hid it for the most part, but Heri didn't doubt that being told she wouldn't be good at something because of her natural disposition was more than the girl could take. With the way she seemed to be using her Time-Tuner ineffectively — if her frazzled, twitchy attitude was anything to go by — it wasn't surprising that her blow-up was as spectacular as it was.

Granger's breakdown came in parts actually. Her temper got the best of her after Care when Malfoy was laughing at Neville for falling into the mud when one of Malfoy's goons pushed him. Ron and his friends had made furious moves to get to Malfoy, but Granger got there first.

_SMACK!_

Granger had whacked him across the face with all the strength she could muster, sending the wretched boy stumbling backward. Even then, she stalked after him.
"Don't you dare call Neville pathetic, you foul — you evil —" she snarled, drawing out her wand.

"Hermione!" said Ron weakly as he tried to grab her arm as she swung it back.

"Get off, Ron!"

Malfoy made his escape, doing nothing for Granger's mood.

Hermione heard from Neville later that Granger had actually missed charms as well.

They had divination that day, starting in on crystal ball reading. Hermione had bought a few books on the subject when she saw it mentioned in the textbook index, and she could honestly say that she had been looking forward to this form of divining most out of all the others. Crystal ball reading was so versatile! Not only was it used for to foretell future events, it could show past events, be used to seek advice, learn more about a person, and even scry. It was like the Swiss army knife of divinatory tools, multi-purposed and less labour-intensive than cartomancy.

Unfortunately, Granger seemed to share none of these opinions.

"Good day to you!" said the familiar, misty voice of Professor Trelawney as she made her usual dramatic entrance out of the shadows. "I have decided to introduce the crystal ball a little earlier than I had planned. The Fates have informed me that your examination in June will concern the Orb, and I am anxious to give you sufficient practice."

Granger snorted audibly from the next table over.

"Honestly... 'the fates have informed her'... who sets the exam? She does! What an amazing prediction!"

"Crystal gazing is a particularly refined art," Professor Trelawney continued dreamily, as if she hadn't heard Granger. "I do not expect any of you to See when first you peer into the orb's infinite depths. We shall start by practicing relaxing the conscious mind and external eyes so as to clear the Inner Eye and the superconscious. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some of you will See before the end of the class."

Granger then took to sniping over every little comment Professor Trelawney made as she coasted through the room. The professor was peering into Heri's — because Heri and commented that she was seeing a shape she couldn't identify — and had once again started her scheduled declaration of, "My dear... It is here, plainer than ever before... my dear, stalking toward you, growing ever closer... the Gr —"

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" Granger busted out loudly. "Not that ridiculous Grim again!"

Professor Trelawney took such a declaration as well as one might expect.

Granger then took the resulting belittling of her 'hopelessly mundane mind' just as unsurprisingly.

Though they should have seen it coming, it was still a shock to all present when Hermione Granger — she of the opinion that to get expelled was worse than death — metaphorically threw her hands in the air and then not so metaphorically rage-quit divination.

It was times like this that made Heri wonder if she should find someone to write a biography on her and then market it in the Muggle world as a multi-volumed fantasy series. Boost the family
coffers and all that. She could become an internationally acclaimed author. Her nom de plume could be Helena Han Boskett.

It all got bollixed up when Heri had been searching for Marcus after the exams with the Marauder's Map and had then seen 'Sirius Black' out on the grounds with 'Ronald Weasley' and 'Peter Pettigrew' being dragging along toward the Whomping Willow. There were so many things wrong with that picture that Heri didn't waste any time high-tailing it out of the castle. It was only luck that had her running into Professor Lupin on the way down.

The luck involved bordered on the edge of 'bad luck' when it appeared that Black and Lupin were pals and that they were laying the blame of betraying her parents to Voldemort and the killing of thirteen Muggles on the tiny shoulders of Ron's pet rat, Scabbers.

"So . . ." Heri had exchanged looks with the also dubious Ron, he who was so bewildered that he had seemed to forget that his leg had been broken. "Scabbers was once a wizard that decided to turn himself into a rat because he made friends with a werewolf, and werewolves are cool with rats. Werewolves are also cool with giant dogs and deer.

"Then there was a war and everyone engaged in guerrilla warfare over whether muggleborns are people too. Scabbers in his Peter form fought against the Dark because all his friends did and he's the type to follow the crowd. And then he betrayed his werewolf — who was and still is Professor Lupin — and his dog and deer — who's Sirius Black and my father respectively — to join the Dark Side because he decided they were no longer important even though he spent all that time to turn himself into a rat and fight with them because—because . . ." — she eyeballed the still struggling Scabbers — "Um . . . because Voldemort had a snake that could eat him? You didn't really explain that last part, sir."

"It's unimportant at this point, Heri," Professor Lupin said tiredly. "What's important is that Peter get taken care of."

"I'm not saying I believe you," Heri said, crossing her arms.

"Then it's time we offered you some proof. Mr. Weasley — give me Peter, please. Now."

Ron had clutched Scabbers closer to his chest.

"Come off it. Are you trying to say he broke out of Azkaban just to get his hands on Scabbers? I mean . . ." He looked up at Heri for support. "Okay, say Pettigrew could turn into a rat — there are millions of rats — how's he supposed to know which one he's after if he was locked up in Azkaban?"

"You know, Sirius, that's a fair question." Lupin turned to Black and frowning slightly. "How did you find out where he was?"

Black put one of his clawlike hands inside his robes and took out a crumpled piece of paper, which he smoothed flat and held out to show the others. It was the photograph of Ron and his family that had appeared in the Daily Prophet the previous summer, and there, on Ron's shoulder, was Scabbers.

There had been a few more minutes of back and forth in which Professor Lupin talked Ron into giving up Scabbers for the animagus revealing spell, but the professor eventually got his way. It was a good thing too, because as soon as the spell it, they were greeted by a rodent-like but definitely human man where Scabbers once was.
That had been sufficient proof for Heri.

While Pettigrew was mid-wheedling for his life, Heri plucked her transfiguration wand from her hair and shrunk his arms and legs to stubs before he knew what was happening. Unable to move beyond wriggling his torso, Pettigrew had squealed and whined in terror.

"Heri!" Ron yelped. "What did you—? Is he—?"

"His limbs are only shrunken, Ron," said Heri, her specialized wand still trained on Pettigrew. "I don't claim to be a judge, but a grown man living as a young boy's pet is a criminal enough even without being a mass murderer and the reason my parents are dead. We are taking him to the headmaster and contacting the DMLE at once."

And all of that would have been resolved if it hadn't been for the dementors that had noticed that Sirius was on the grounds while they were marching back up to the castle.

From atop the west tower that over looked the Forbidden Forest and the Whomping Willow, a figure witnessed the scene unfolding on the green.

It was truly a singular spectacle. A veritable flood of soul-sucking wights were descending upon a single fallen man while a young girl raced towards him, and another grown man fought to carry an injured child while also hauling a prisoner up to the safety of the castle, all the while calling back that he would bring help.

Actually, now that he was thinking of it in those terms, it wasn't that singular at all. Such happenings were quite commonplace back in the early ages.

It was still unusual though.

He watched as the ghastly phantoms surged closer, reaching out with their putrid hands to grasp at the fallen man as well as the girl. Before his eyes, she snarled a filthy word and . . . shifted into an amorphous form.

Now this was interesting. He hadn't known she was capable of such a thing.

Now in similar make as the spectres leering down at them, the girl surged up, trailing smoke, and — with dark tendrils that appeared out of her back — latched onto one them that was clutching at the man. There was a screeching sound as she heaved a steadying breath. Suddenly her mouth became a maw and she was inhaling the beast much like the way they did souls. As the creatures recoiled momentarily, she grew more blurred at the edges and her tendrils lashed the air like a kraken whipping its tentacle.

The monsters were not deterred for long though.

He watched as the girl retrieved a wand from her hair and shouted, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" while jabbing the wooden rod into the air. Lo and behold, a dazzling, blinding, silver animal burst forth from her wand.

Was that . . . ? Was that a platypus? Hmm, it could be a tadpool as well . . .

Well, whatever it was, it charged at the swarming wraiths and drove them back. It seemed that the child had hit upon their one true weakness. They were falling back, scattering, retreating into the darkness of the evening.
That little girl had driven off a murderous flock of those hellish creatures with one spell. He was not familiar with these wizarding types, but he was duly impressed but such a feat all the same.

It seemed that his lord's new fascination was living up to expectation. He would be delighted to hear so.

Without a sound, he shifted to smoke and melted into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Shout-outs to Faust VII for their story, Café, where The Nightengale's Cage in Vertic Alley and part of the Gringotts scene came from, and to Silently Watches for their story, Princess of the Blacks, where the Shuffling Whipplestumpers came from.

AN1: This story was started before Pottermore released information about the Potter family, so I know NOW that Dorea Black is more likely a great-aunt, but for this story Heri's paternal grandparents will be Charlus and Dorea instead of Fleamont and Euphemia. Everything that's canon for Fleamont and Euphemia should be assumed so for Charlus and Dorea in this story.

AN2: Go here: (https://i.pinimg.com/736x/cc/49/4b/cc494b4ac8d545a903c7ee28127214d1--fantastic-beasts-baby.jpg) to see an image of a snidget chick. It's cute AF.

AN3: If I don't make mention of an event, it happens as canon. So, since Ginny being possessed wasn't discussed, everything that happened with her was exactly like the book.

AN4: The rune poem/song mentioned was written Annalemma McKee-Schwenke. I found her when I was looking for songs to memorize Elder Futhark.

AN5: If you haven't noticed, the titles I gave to Heri are fake IRL. There are no counties of Heorshire or Swetechester or any of the others anywhere in the UK. I've always thought it would make sense if the Wizarding World made stretches of land Unplottable to Muggles when they separated. I can't imagine people like the Blacks and Malfoys giving up their properties and entitlements, especially to the muggles they looked down on. This is basically my head canon. I got the idea from Josephine Darcy's The Marriage Stone, but honestly, it just makes sense to me.

I know all the titles seem a bit excessive, but I did a little research on it and found that it was very common in the 17th century for noblemen to bulk up their status with subsidiary titles. This was also for the benefit of the eldest son, who would use the highest subsidiary title as his own. For example, the Duke of Norfolk is also the Earl of Arundel (among other things), so to give the son some responsibility, the son goes by the courtesy title of Earl of Arundel even though he wouldn't be the actual earl until his father dies. Rest assured, the titles won't be a huge part of the story (right now anyway). They're just there for what I consider realism and world-expanding.
In a location parallel to time and space, wide, doe-like eyes flew open. With a gasp, a woman jolted up from where she had been lying, a hand clutching at her throat. Her other hand clawed at the fabric of her dress as she panted as if she had been running for miles.

She took a moment to compose herself before her brown eyes narrowed.

Something was not right.

This bore intervention.

From its ground-hugging position at the feet of a tattered armchair, a lengthy, green snake sat coiled in wait. Its keen, unblinking gaze was locked on the men in the middle of the ill-kept, shabby room. In the gloom of the dimly-lit sitting room, they could have been arrested from just how suspicious the proceedings appeared.

One of the men was very modest-looking — he could have passed for anything from an office-worker to a farmer if he hadn't looked like he had been severely beaten with a plank of wood before being dragged across the countryside through dirt and muck. This man was unconscious and spread across a dusty, low-standing coffee table with one of the other shady fellows hovering over him with a polished stake of wood, prodding at him harshly. For whatever reason, the unconscious man didn't wake up despite the rough treatment.

The second man was a fair-haired, pale fellow that might have passed as attractive if it wasn't for his stress-lined face and the distinct madness he exuded. He was crouched over the first man like a vulture looming over its fallen prey. With a steady hand that belied the mania of his expression, he bound his victim through invisible forces.

The third man was what elevated the proceedings from merely suspicious to horrific. Flesh sagged in the most unflattering way. The skin was unhealthy and limp with that sallow, oily sheen meat got when it wasn't only rotting, but hosting maggots that were finally mature enough to begin eating their way out into the open. Leathery patches of hair and skin were hanging off in the way of an animal that had run afoul with a wood-chipper. His body was draped across a faded settee, and if it wasn't for the occasional blink, one would have thought him to be as dead as he looked. As it was, it was difficult to acertain if such a creature was a true man or a reanimated carcass.

"I grow tired of waiting," the vision of horror said in a breathy, groaning voice. His tone was flat and impatient. As he spoke, the chapped skin of his lips split apart, oozing congealing blood and pus.

"Wait no more, my lord," said the fair-haired fanatic, stepping away from the prostrated body and lowering himself into the dust in a kneel. "The body is ready to receive you."

The abomination of a living thing creaked to his feet and made his ungainly way over to loom over the unconscious man like his servant had. Flakes of unknown substances fell from him as he teetered forward. Without further ado, he then climbed onto the prone body and reached his decaying hands out to rest on the shallowly breathing chest.

"Silence the room, Barty," the walking corpse commanded. "We wouldn't want the Muggles to
come snooping after hearing this filth's screams."

This proved to be a well-thought precaution, for not long after those words the entire decrepit room echoed with inhuman shrieks and the sound of wood pounding wood as the body writhed and thrashed spasmodically.

Nearly two hundred miles away, Heri Potter bolted straight up in bed, breath ragged, eye wide, her scar throbbing furiously. Distressed, octopus-like tendrils erupted from her, lashing out blindly, destroying whatever was in reach.

A good week and a half after the capture of Pettigrew (and three days after Sirius had been cleared of all charges), Sirius had managed to set up a place to live just in time to receive Heri as she came for the summer holidays. It was an old townhouse that had seen better days, but it was clean enough where it mattered, and really anything was more welcoming that staying with the Dursleys. What mattered to Heri was the fact that the room set up for her was obviously done up with care, actually being the cleanest place in the house on top of being the only room with all new furniture. It was a sweet gesture, and she let Sirius know that she appreciated the accommodations already made and that she wasn't in the least bothered that they weren't living in a castle (as he seemed to have feared she might).

Not that they let it remain ill-kept, of course — a few hundred charm'd cleaning supplies working non-stop for over just half a week and it was clean enough to eat off the floors.

Living with Sirius had the potential to be uncomfortable if it hadn't been for a few helpful factors that eased their interactions. It should have gone without saying that Remus was a god-send.

They dragged Remus in right off the bat, sweet-talking him into staying with them at least for the summer.

Remus had been living in muggle London before his time as a Hogwarts' professor, working modest jobs that were willing to let him have three days off in a row during the time of the full moon. He cited religious reasons for why he needed that specific time, but even with Muggles as a whole not believing in magical creatures any more, Muggles still looked at you funny if you mentioned needing time off during the full moon. Thinking about it, saying he was part of a religion that had rites during the full moon likely made Remus' potential employers think he was in a cult.

Even with Remus smoothing the path, living with Sirius was like staying with a formerly absentee father that had had no idea their child existed before but was eager to make up for the lost time (sort of like how she'd wished her godly parent would do). It was awkward at times, but she could tell that he really was trying his best. That was all she could ask of him, especially since he was still very young at heart. It was lucky that Heri wasn't one that needed a lot of looking after.

Sirius wasn't one for laying down the law, that was evident in the way he had told Heri that besides making sure she didn't kill herself she was free to do whatever she wanted.

"Provided that you tell me when you're off to visit your friends' places," Sirius had added.

He didn't even assign her any chores — Oona, their house elf, didn't allow Heri to do anything beyond picking up her own room. The house was cleaned, the plants were tended to, the meals were prepared, everything was kept in a working manner, and all without any work on Heri's part. It took some time to get adjusted.

That was not to say that she was idle without her usual tasks. Sirius was all for going out and
doing things, likely a result of being in prison for so long. The three of them hopped around both muggle and magical Britain, seeing shows at theatres and cinemas, eating out at nice restaurants, watching Quidditch games, visiting museums — the works. Heri could honestly say that she saw more of the world in those few months than she had her entire life before. Add on that she finally had the opportunity to hang out with her friends outside of school and it was like she had been transplanted into an entirely different life.

Of course, it wasn't all rainbows and butterflies. Sirius, for all his cluelessness, was well aware that he wasn't the best person to know how to take care of a young girl. He took it upon himself to bring in someone he believed to be extremely capable of child-rearing into the picture to act as 'the female influence that Heri needed.' Not that Heri wanted some woman she had never met before to play at being her mother or whatever. Thus entered Auntie Andromeda.

Now, Auntie Andromeda wasn't actually Heri's aunt. According to the genealogy tapestry the Black family kept in what was much like a trophy room, the older woman and Sirius were actually Heri's second cousins, Heri's grandmother being their great-aunt. In the case of Sirius, Heri had no qualms addressing him informally, but it somehow felt disrespectful to address the stately yet kind woman so familiarly. Since Andromeda was not only older than Heri's parents but had a daughter of her own that was older than Heri as well, 'Auntie' just felt natural.

As aforementioned, Auntie Andromeda was kind. She was even-tempered, soft-spoken, good-humoured, and had a gentle touch that put people at ease. Of course, many people described Heri that way as well, but there was no doubting that Heri wasn't one to mess about with. Such was the same with Andromeda Tonks.

Heri first met Auntie Andromeda after Sirius remembered that he had the power to disown and reinstate family members. He had gotten the most wickedly gleeful look on his face before he popped off to Gringotts'. He came home that evening mumbling about "bitches getting what they deserve." The next day, mid-breakfast, Auntie Andromeda came almost running out of the fireplace, still in her nightgown. She had pounced on Sirius and pelted him with kisses and exclamations of thanks. That had been the first and only time since then that Heri ever saw Auntie Andromeda looking anything but perfectly composed.

Auntie Andromeda was of the opinion that Heri was in need of instruction in the ways of ladies. Heri wasn't sure how the older woman came to that conclusion — she didn't know anything about Heri's stint as a neighbourhood hooligan and she had only ever met with Heri's mannerly front. It might have had something to do with the way Sirius more or less let Heri run wild though. Catching the two of them on the third floor, determining the trajectory Heri would have to jump if she wanted to land in the tree in the back garden likely sealed the deal. Since then, every visit from Auntie Andromeda included manner lessons.

On that day in particular, Heri was being educated in proper conduct for tea parties. She blamed it all on Sirius.

Earlier that day, Heri had a fit of fancy and decided to make use of the abundance of dolls and stuffed animals Sirius had provided for her when decorating her room. She supposed that he hadn't really realised that Heri was a bit too grown for dollyes and plushies, but they were the first toys since her babyhood that she had ever had and she loved them all the same. She hadn't done much with the beyond admiring them, but she was quite set on playing tea party with them that day.

Heri had dressed up a handful of her prettiest dolls and arranged them around a short table she had enlarged and transfigured from a miniature table she had gotten from the doll house Sirius had gotten for her. She had found an old tea set in the attic, and she thought they looked quite lovely
spread out as they were on her little table. She had been chattering on to a china doll that she had
seated in the guest of honour spot to her right when Sirius used his impeccable timing to walk in right
then.

Suffice to say that Heri didn't let Sirius get away with laughing at her. Before he could call for
reinforcements, Heri had him in an unnaturally turquoise doll dress that she enlarged to fit him and a
magnificently ribboned bonnet she had also found in the attic. Despite his protests, Heri noticed that
he got on well enough with Behemoth, Sirius' seat-neighbour and Heri's pink velveteen
hippopotamus.

Auntie Andromeda caught them having a food fight with the snacks Oona had brought up for
them. She had first thought that no one was home when no one had been in the drawing room when
she arrived, but the sound of shouting and the clatter of crockery had drawn her attention. She took
one look of them — Heri with sandwich in her hair, Sirius in a cake-smeared tea gown — and told
them in no uncertain terms that they would go clean up and meet her in the drawing room in an hour
for a proper tea.

That had been an hour and a half ago, and even with the additions to their little party in the form
of Remus and Auntie Andromeda's daughter, Cousin Dora, the current tea party and etiquette lesson
was nowhere near as exciting as the food fight from earlier.

Bless her, for all the Auntie Andromeda was an intelligent, well-educated woman, she couldn't
teach for tuppence. Not in a way that engaged her students at least. The only person Heri knew less
exciting while they lectured was Professor Binns. She had gone into detail about the arrangement of
a tea table — that went beyond "put this here, and that there, or else you'll be an uncivilised heathen"
— and had just now — after thirty minutes — started in on how a body was supposed to interact
with the dishes and cups.

"The saucer should be in the palm of the left hand before being moved forward to rest on the
fingers. The fingers should be slightly spread apart to achieve a good balance. The saucer should
then be steadied by the thumb resting on the rim."

Auntie Andromeda held up her own teacup and saucers in example.

By this time, Remus and Cousin Dora had gone ahead with their sipping and nibbling. They had
determined that it was Heri that Auntie Andromeda was focused on, so there was no reason for them
to not fill their bellies already.

Sirius was of a similar opinion as well, but he appeared to taking care to be as obscenely
uncivilised as he could manage short of stripping naked and just rolling around in the finger-foods.
He bared his teeth and lipped up fairy cakes like a horse with a carrot and held his tea in both hands
like a squirrel with an acorn. This was possibly for Heri's benefit, to provide some amusement as
could be given. This seemed to be its only possible purpose, as it didn't seem to be making a
difference to Auntie Andromeda either way.

Auntie Andromeda delicately gripped her cup and made a show of taking a sip from it.

"A handled cup is held with the index fingertip tucked slightly through the handle, the thumb just
above it to support the grip, and the second finger below the handle for added security. The next two
fingers should naturally follow the curve of the others. Sirius."

Those seated at the table stiffened at the sharp tone. Remus looked as if he were the one being
addressed and Cousin Dora turned white literally all over. Sirius looked at his cousin with wide-eyes,
his tongue still stuck out from how he had been lapping from his cup like a beast in direct contrast to
how Andromeda was trying to teach Heri. He slowly lowered the cup to the table — tucking a comically raised pinkie back into his hand — and fidgeted in his seat like a naughty child that's been called to task.

Auntie Andromeda gave Sirius a stern, unamused look before returning her serious gaze to Heri.

"It should go without saying that lifting one's little finger is to be avoided absolutely. A common misconception is that outstretching one's little finger aids in the balance of the cup when taking a sip of tea — this is certainly not the case, and is not only pointless, but it is also pretentious beyond words."

Heri didn't have anything to say to that, so she only nodded gravely in response.

"Now. Tea should be served by the host or a friend — not servants. One must not pour multiple cups at a time, nor should one pass out several cups at once. To do so would be to insult your guests. The careful, personal care taken for each cup of tea is a gesture of regard and goodwill between the server and the guest.

"Because the server has direct influence over the tea — and thus the health of the guests — it is considered an honour to be asked to pour the tea . . ."

This was how Heri spent her summer when not gadding about with Sirius and Remus or visiting her friends. Auntie Andromeda was a harsh task-master when she worked herself into it, and there seemed to be no end to the things she believed that Heri needed to know before she could pass for approval. It really made no sense to Heri since it wasn't as if they had any obligation to rub elbows with the sort of folk that took such business seriously; they weren't exactly going to go meet up with the Queen anytime soon. Still, it was a good thing that Heri had taken up sewing as a stress-relieving hobby the year before because it was one of the many hobbies Auntie Andromeda encouraged Heri to develop.

"A young lady needs a quiet, respectable hobby," Auntie Andromeda had said after she pressed a pile of soft cloths on Heri and suggested she make herself a new cloth doll. (Did she think Heri was six?) She seemed to be ignoring the fact that her own daughter was more likely to join a burping contest than a knitting circle; Cousin Dora was an unrepentant tomboy who was almost as 'respectable' as Sirius. Auntie Andromeda had only relented when Heri showed the older woman the handkerchief she had edged.

Considering that the other choices included flower-pressing and writing poetry, Heri congratulated herself on dodging a bullet. As it was, her mannerly front was being forced to become so high-society, she was starting to fret that she would develop a split-personality.

"I'd say I'm sorry you have to deal with all this," Cousin Dora had said during a break in yet another one of Auntie Andromeda's lessons. On that occasion, Heri was learning to walk while balancing books on her head. Auntie Andromeda had popped out to talk with Sirius about something. "But I won't, because that would be lying. She had a Hell of a time with me, especially when it became clear that my clumsiness was something I'd never be out-growing. It's nice to see her have so much fun teaching you."

Heri had glowered a bit in response.

"While I can appreciate her effort, I really don't care much for being 'ladylike.' I've never put so much effort in being girly before in my life."

Cousin Dora snorted and leaned back in her armchair.
"You having me on? I've seen you with a couple of your other bobble-heads giggling on like pixies. As if you don't go to the top school in the nation. If you got any fluffier, you'd be a cloud!"

Heri gave the older girl a look.

"People don't like it when you're too serious. They also don't like it when you notice things they'd rather you didn't. It's only polite that I make sure I never give them the impression that I've caught on more than they thought; it would be rude of me to do things I know people don't like. You can call it being an airhead, but I call it being courteous."

"Here now, I'm just saying I don't understand why you act so vapid when everyone already knows you've got some brains in that fluffy little head of yours. A good half of the Auror Corps have family at Hogwarts, and you can bet your arse their midgets carry on about Heri Potter this, and Heri Potter that, and how you're one of the brightest students in your year. It's more or less common knowledge!"

That was when Auntie Andromeda returned with more books for the stack. With a look she beckoned Heri back over.

As Heri got back to her feet, she told Cousin Dora, "I don't doubt that people know I'm not an idiot, but I hope you realise that there's quite a bit of a difference between being smart and being observant."

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**Back before Heri was born, before Lily was too heavily pregnant to attend Order of the Phoenix meetings, Lily used to chat with Alice Longbottom (her dear friend) about what things would be like when their babies were born. They would talk about genders, and names, and what their children would be like together. They discussed possible personality quirks and how they hoped the children would be friends. They pointedly did **not** talk about the inevitable troubles of raising children in times of war.**

A topic the two women often returned to was keeping the children entertained. In other words: toys. In theory, it would be easy to conjure some bubbles and sparkles every now and then to keep the babies from being bored, but in reality, they had heard enough about Fabian and Gideon Prewett's nephews to know that there were no real substitutes for actual toys. Of course, the trouble with this was that they couldn't pop out to a toy store while being in hiding as they were. They could technically transfigure whatever was lying around the house into a soft toy if they really wanted to, but it struck them as stingy to just pluck up whatever they could get their hands on instead of getting the real deal.

It was at this time that Sirius made himself invaluable. Having often heard Lily and Alice fret about not having toys for their children, he began going out to the Alleys in disguise to pick up some. He figured it was the least he could do since he would be the godfather to Lily's child. He would buy only a couple of them at a time before meetings that he knew both women would attend, as it would have been suspicious for any one person to buy toys in bulk, especially during those tense times. He kept this up right up until the Longbottoms and Potters went under Fidelius, and even afterwards he would pick up a toy during his patrols of the Alleys if one caught his eyes.

It was during a patrol of Casu Alley in late September of 1981 that Sirius' eye was not only caught, but captured. In the window of an Enchanter's workshop there was china doll that looked remarkably similar to how he imagined Heri would look in the future. It was dressed in a lacy cream-coloured dress-and-bonnet outfit, had wavy mahogany hair, and had eyes just a few shades off from the green Lily and Heri shared. It stood at approximately a foot in height, and the description underneath it boasted that it was fully articulated, that the china was unbreakable, and that the colour
would never fade.

With one look, Sirius knew that he couldn't possibly leave without buying the doll. It would be like spotting the Snitch and not chasing after it! He hadn't spent any time with Heri since before she could sit up, and arriving with several holidays worth of presents was only scratching the surface of how he would make up for it. He would have to hold onto it until he could visit the Potters for Christmas, but there wasn't a doubt in his mind that the doll was meant for Heri.

Sirius left the doll in his Gringotts vault like he had with the rest of the toys he intended to give to his god-daughter and returned to the Order's Headquarters with a smile on his lips.

In the end, that Christmas never came.

When Sirius' hellish stint in Azkaban finally came to an end and he somehow found himself free again with an orphaned no-longer-infant god-daughter soon to be living with him, toys were the last thing on his mind. He had less than a month — Hell, less than a fortnight — to scrounge up a place that he could take care of his kid in. Loathe that he was to return to the place, his childhood home really was the only place that could be fixed up to be ready in time for the end of the school year. In his rush to make the place liveable, he decided to bring out furniture from the storage vault — it was then that he rediscovered all the toys he had bought for Heri.

In a handful of dusty crates sitting on an equally dusty end table were a lot more toys than he remembered buying. In fact, Sirius couldn't recall buying a good two-third of them all. One crate dedicated to stuffed animals, one for puzzles and colouring books, and others filled with dolls of all shapes and sizes. Laying on top of the rest was the last china doll he had ever bought, still as vividly painted as on the day he had bought it, just as the shop had advertised. Looking them all over, he decided that it was high time Heri received the gifts he had meant to give her.

Sirius would openly admit that he spent the majority of his effort on Heri's room. Not only was he excited to finally spend time with his kid, he figured that a well done up bedroom was the least he could do to make up for screwing up so royally that he ended up in jail for over a decade and leaving her with Lily's bitch of a sister. With every detail he put into decorating the third-floor room overlooking the back garden, he hoped to convey how much she meant to him.

On the day Sirius went to pick up Heri from King's Cross station, he brought along the china doll that looked so much like her.

He had held it out to her as soon as he set her back down from an enthusiastic hug.

"Here's a — um— a homecoming gift for you. Is that what it's called? Maybe it's a . . . a 'welcome home' gift, or a 'thank you for coming' gift," he rambled in a stumbling tone. He laughed a little nervously when he saw her cover a smile with her fingers like his girl cousins used to do when they laughed at stupid boys. "Well, whatever it is, it's for you."

Heri had taken the doll with a wondering look on her face.

"She's beautiful," she said. She looked up with a bright smile and hug the doll to herself. "Thank you very much. I've never had a china doll before. I think I'll call her — hmm . . ."

She tapped her bottom lip in thought. A bright smile then lit her face.

"I'll name her Iolanthe."

"Erm, why Iolanthe?" asked Sirius as he ushered her toward the Floo. "Not that there's anything wrong with Iolanthe, of course! I just mean, it's oddly specific, y'know?"
"You're right." Heri nodded amicably as she ambled beside him, examining her new doll more thoroughly. "It's just — well, I used to do a lot of thinking on my namesake, you know? Being named after a god of heroes sets a lofty standard. I remember reading that Hercules used to run about with a bloke named Iolaus, so I figured that since Hercules had an Iolaus, it would make sense that I have an Iolanthe."

Much to Sirius' delight, Heri seemed genuinely attached to Iolanthe. He had originally been concerned that not only would she not like the doll, but she would try to spare his feelings by faking excitement as well. These worries turned out to be for nothing, as she took to carrying the doll everywhere; he often caught sight of her idly fiddling with its clothes or with the articulation of its joints. He also noticed that the doll began to grow more in looks like Heri every time he saw it. This warmed Sirius' heart, as he knew that the things that you personalised were the things that meant the most to you.

On the day that he walked in on Heri in the middle of — of all things — a tea party with her toys, he noticed that Iolanthe was once again right by her side. And not only had it finally been completely transfigured into the exact replication of Heri's feature, it was also wearing an identical outfit. The picture they made together was just so cute that he had been too distracted to make his escape of Heri's grasps. He would later claim that he had been too busy laughing, but truth be told, he hadn't been in much of a hurry to escape the chance to finally play with his kid.

Heri didn't know what it was, but lately, she was absorbed in . . . crafting? Was that the word for it? It sounded so primary-school, but she wasn't sure what else it could be called. That thing where you make stuff from out of other stuff and some imagination that doesn't necessarily require magic to make it work, but magic still helped. Whatever that was called, it was currently retaining the majority of her attention.

In a response to Auntie Andromeda's eternal harping on about comportment and respectable past-times, Heri found herself always tinkering away at something when the older woman was around, if only to distract herself from the inevitably lengthy lectures.

Auntie Andromeda could be so boring; Heri had taken to keeping herself occupied with whatever she could get her hands on, 'appropriate' needlework or not. Instead of the weapon practice and monster slaying she usually did during her summers, she was sewing away at the drapes, napkins, and table-clothes; poking at the artefacts lying around; and drawing on any flat surface that Sirius didn't stop her from marking all over.

Quite honestly, she had never had the chance to just mess about with odds and ends before, not with the Dursleys being the way they were. It wasn't until she had gotten away from their direct area of influence that she discovered the slew of things that interested her: flying; divination; Ghoul Studies; runes; magical creatures.

It was odd to realise that she had lived most of her life without any real interest in anything; it made her wonder if that made her personality shallow. Or maybe 'shallow' wasn't the right word. Vague? Faint? Whatever the proper word was, she certainly wasn't a well-adjusted human being. She still wasn't exactly a well-adjusted human being, but at least she could acknowledge the fact. (She also accepted that she would never be so, no matter how well-adjusted she might become in the future, because godborns weren't human, much like in the way that hippogriffs were neither griffin nor horse.)

In any case, it was great fun finding out that she found tinkering with things great fun.

Beyond the frippery that kept her fussy older cousin from nagging, it was fascinating to discover
how the knick-knacks in the house actually worked, and it was endlessly amusing to watch how the
furniture reacted to the different rune sequences she drew on them. There wasn't a thing in her room
that hadn't been all but transmuted during her experimentations, so much that a good half didn't even
resemble their original forms any longer.

On that particular day, Heri was messing about with Iolanthe. It was the last fortnight of summer
before school started again, and she was spending a rare day by herself. All the shopping had already
been taken care of and there was nothing scheduled. She was taking advantage of the lazy day to act
upon an idea she had been tossing around in her mind for a while now.

With a fine-tipped calligraphy pen, Heri very carefully traced over the chalked bind-rune she had
drawn on the space between Iolanthe's shoulders. She was using an ink she had made specifically for
the task at hand. The recipe for the ink had been in one of the less-dangerous books in the house: it
called for grounded black walnut, the shavings from a Kaffir lime, and soot from the burned remains
of freshly killed doxies. She kept her hand steady, taking care to never pull her pen away. Slowly, a
symbol made from combining Ansuz and Berkana stood out in stark contrast of the whiteness of the
doll's back.

The wet ink glistened as Heri finally pulled her pen back to admire the rune. Holding Iolanthe
carefully to keep the shape from running, Heri leaned in, drew in a slow breath, and breathed out a
wisp of flame that dried the ink immediately. Being a fire created by magic, it also acted as an
activation trigger.

Iolanthe twitched in Heri's hands. Her feet kicked out and her torso jerked like a person that had
been prodded in the side.

Holding her breath, Heri placed the doll on the table in front of her and observed avidly.

Iolanthe had been placed on the table on her side, but her little hands soon pushed herself up into
a propped up position. Her little legs then bent at the knees briefly before she pulled herself up to
stand wobbly on her feet. There was the most befuddled look on the doll's face as she inspected her
suddenly autonomous limbs while also wrapping her mind around the fact that she now had a mind.

After a moment of complete fascination with her hands, Iolanthe looked up at Heri adoringly.

Heri breathed out gustily and grinned. She extended her forefinger for Iolanthe to grip, which the
doll did happily, much like how babies did.

"Do you understand me?" Heri asked, stroking Iolanthe's hair with her other hand.

Iolanthe smiled dopily and nodded.

"Mmm . . ." Heri's fingers traced down to Iolanthe's neck. "Can't talk?"

The dopey expression fell a bit and the doll cast her eyes down abashedly.

"Ah, it's alright," said Heri, waving off the concern. "That's just something we'll have to look into
for later. As it is, I think the animation rune was a complete success."

It amused Heri that she had apparently succeeded at breathing life into a creation.

Sirius had somehow rustled up Top Box tickets for the Quidditch World Cup. The tickets cost a
glossy Galleon considering the Top Box was where the Minister and foreign dignitaries sat, but Heri
figured it had something to do with the recompense the Ministry owed Sirius for a decade of illegal
incarceration. In any case, Sirius had come home with a cat-that-got-the-canary grin with the tickets waving in his hand like a fan.

In his generous mood, Sirius told Heri that she could invite along a couple of friends as well.

Heri would've invited Hannah, but the other girl already had plans with her extended family. She had considered inviting along Wayne since he had bemoaned on the train that his mother thought going would be a waste of money, but then she remembered that Ernie had invited Wayne to come along with him and Zacharias, so she figured that Megan would enjoy prime seats as opposed to somewhere else in the crowd.

The game was less than a week off when Sirius got the tickets, so Heri had been worried that Megan's family had already bought their own tickets, but she worried for nothing — Megan's mother all but shoved Megan through the floor when she heard that Heri was inviting her daughter to the Top Box. After Sally-Anne's grateful but nonchalant acceptance, the enthusiasm was amusing.

The day before the World Cup, Sally-Anne and Megan arrived by floo before the five of them caught a portkey to the camping grounds.

Hundreds upon hundreds of tents were pitched across the misty moor that the Department of Magical Games and Sports had booked for use. With the sheer quantity of wizards, most of them dressed like they had just been introduced to clothing, it was amazing the muggle owner of the camp-grounds (Mr. Roberts) hadn't thrown off the Memory Charms he had been subjected to. Heri was glad their camp-site was a good distance away from Mr. Roberts, as she wouldn't be able to hide her embarrassment if she witnessed another wizard in a lady's satin nightgown and a sombrero trying to make nice with the Muggle.

The stadium built just for the World Cup was magnificent. The stairs were carpeted in rich purple and the seats were cushioned from seat to back-rest. As they clambered upward with the rest of the crowd, Heri couldn't help but wonder at the quality of lifestyle innate to wizards simply because of what they could do with magic.

Their party kept climbing until they finally reached the top of the staircase and found themselves in a small box, set at the highest point of the stadium and situated exactly halfway between the golden goal posts. About twenty purple-and-gilt chairs stood in two rows here, and Heri looked down upon a scene the likes of which she could never have imagined.

A hundred thousand witches and wizards were taking their places in the seats, which rose in levels around the long oval field. Everything was suffused with a dreamy golden light, which seemed to come from the stadium itself. The field looked smooth as velvet from their lofty position. At either end of the field stood three goal hoops, fifty feet high. Right opposite them was a gigantic blackboard — gold writing kept dashing across it as though an invisible giant's hand were scrawling upon the blackboard and then wiping it off again; watching it, Heri saw that it was flashing advertisements across the field:

_The Bluebottle: A Broom for All the Family — safe, reliable, and with Built-in Anti-Burglar Buzzer... Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover: No Pain, No Stain!... Gladrags Wizardwear — London, Paris, Hogsmeade..._

"Amazing!" Megan breathed, and though Sally-Anne tried to play it cool, she too was impressed. The two of them were fixated at the sight of crowd rising around the Box.

"I don't think I've ever had such a view before," Remus remarked, also marvelling at the opulent accommodations.
Surprisingly, the Weasleys were there as well, minus Mrs. Weasley. It seemed that Mr. Weasley was higher up in the governmental hierarchy that Heri had initially thought, because she could see him shaking hands with people who were obviously very important people. The introduction and merging of the two groups went off without a hitch, with Sirius, Remus, Megan, and Sally-Anne being introduced to the Weasley brood, and Bill and Charlie Weasley being introduced to Heri.

Their enthusiastic greetings drew the attention of the Minister of Magic himself. Cornelius Fudge, for all his faults, was a consummate politician. Apparently, he was the reason they got Top Box tickets; they were there as his guests to smooth over the unjust imprisonment business as well as to have a national treasure (Heri) available to show off. Ignoring how he had declared that Sirius was to be Kissed on sight back when he was a fugitive, the portly man made short work of greeting Sirius and Heri like old friends and introducing them to the wizards on either side of him.

Sirius was about as politic as a soapy sponge to the face, and so he escaped the situation with all the slickness of a greased boar. He left Heri as a scapegoat, of course. Lucky for him, Heri wouldn't have escaped with him even if she had the chance to do so since she would have considered doing so to be very rude. Either way, Heri was left behind to play diplomat while Sirius decided to relive his childhood.

"Heri Potter, you know," Fudge said loudly to the Bulgarian Minister, who was wearing splendid robes of black velvet trimmed with gold and didn't seem to understand a word of English. "Heri Potter . . . oh, come on now, you know who she is . . . the girl who defeated You-Know-Who . . . you do know who she is —"

A breeze hit the stands and the Bulgarian wizard suddenly spotted Heri's scar as her fringe was blown off her forehead. He started gabbling loudly and excitedly, pointing at it.

"Knew we'd get there in the end," said Fudge wearily to Heri as she giggled and smoothed her hair back down. "I'm no great shakes at languages; I need Barty Crouch for this sort of thing. The man knows more languages than I know Ministry Departments . . . ah, and here's Lucius!"

Edging along the second row to three still-empty seats right behind Mr. Weasley were none other than Dobby's former owners: Lucius Malfoy (Heri had a brief encounter with him before wherein he had accidentally given Dobby the boot); his son, Draco; and a woman Heri supposed must be Draco's mother. It seemed that blond hair ran in the family, even extending to Mrs. Malfoy with her blond streaked brown hair. She was tall and slim, and would've been very nice-looking if she hadn't been wearing an expression that suggested there was a nasty smell under her nose.

"Ah, Minister," said Mr. Malfoy, holding out his hand as he reached them. "How are you? I don't think you've met my wife, Narcissa? Or our son, Draco?"

"How do you do, how do you do?" said Fudge, smiling and bowing to Mrs. Malfoy. "And allow me to introduce you to Mr. Oblansk — Obalonsk — Mr. — well, he's the Bulgarian Minister of Magic, and he can't understand a word I'm saying anyway, so never mind. And let's see who else — you know Arthur Weasley, I dare say?"

He smiled kindly at Mr. Weasley.

"Lucius has just given a very generous contribution to St. Mungo's Hospital, Arthur. He's here as my guest."

It was a tense moment. Fudge was apparently as oblivious as a diricawl in the middle of a rainstorm, judging by the way he completely missed how the two men looked primed to claw each other's eyes out.
And this is Heri Potter!" Fudge continued brightly, putting a hand on her shoulder blade as if to lead her forward like a show dog. "I noticed that you are already acquainted with her, Arthur, but I don't think you have been introduced, Lucius. Miss Potter is here today as another of my guests. Her godfather mentioned to me that they were planning on coming out to the World Cup, so I thought she might enjoy the best seating available.

"What do you say, my dear?"

Heri gave him Smile No. 17, the dewy-eyed, ditsy one for older people that saw her as a cute little girl. She had crafted it especially for Auntie Andromeda. She paired the look with a soft lisp to reinforce the image.

"I've been having the loveliest time so far, sir. I can't imagine what it'll be like when the game starts!"

This was one occasion that Heri's diminutive height came in handy; it just made her appear even less threatening. Fudge smiled indulgently in response, completely missing the wary look the Malfoy boy gave her.

The three men were eventually caught up in other business, leaving Heri free to do as she wanted. She took the opportunity to speak with the Malfoy woman.

"You must be Draco's mother," Heri said with a small smile, No. 4; it was much more genuine than No. 17 but meant to be just as endearing. She tucked one foot behind the other and bobbed at the knees while spreading her skirt slightly, giving a small curtsy. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I'm Heri Potter."

Malfoy the younger looked like he wanted to say some choice words to her for addressing him by his first name. Instead, he swallowed them down. They both knew that in a situation with several people sharing the same family name, the youngest was to be called by his first name to reduce confusion.

Mrs. Malfoy raised a brow, looking knowingly between her son and Heri. She inclined her head in acknowledgement while her dung-sniffing expression softened just the tiniest bit.

"Likewise, I'm sure. Narcissa Malfoy. You have prettier manners than I was expecting."

Heri assumed Position No. 3, her hands behind her back, hips cocked just so, with a small grin as she glanced at the ground just once before peering up through her eyelashes. It was meant to make her appear bashful but unintimidated while playing up her cuteness (as most of her practised mannerisms were supposed to).

"I've had to practice some, of course," she said, easing back a notch on the lisp. "My muggle relatives have different standards. In any case, I'm glad to know that you approve, ma'am."

A faint smile curved Mrs. Malfoy's lips, the knowing look growing.

"Indeed, Miss Potter. I'm rather impressed. I must admit, I was not expecting such a genial greeting; it's known to me that Draco and yourself tend to disagree on matters."

Mrs. Malfoy certainly had a gift for understatement. That was an exceedingly polite way of phrasing the racial slurs, death threats, and physical violence exchanged between the two of them.

Heri's smile grew wider as she straightened. Her eyes curved into cheery crescents.
"Draco and I may have our differences, but I'd rather let a person make their own impressions, ma'am. Besides, it wouldn't do to ostracise a relative before even talking to them, would it?"

A moue of incomprehension was Heri's answer.

"I don't follow what you mean," said Mrs. Malfoy.

Beside her, her pointy-nosed offspring looked even more confused.

"My godfather has recently acknowledged me as heir apparent to the House of Black."

The widening of Mrs. Malfoy's eyes said enough.

Heri continued on blithely.

"As the future Marchioness of Swetechester, I have been studying the lines of descent of past Heads of House. I've discovered that I have quite a few second cousins, you being one of them, ma'am. I thought that it would be a waste of an opportunity if I didn't get to know you."

The look on little Malfoy's face was one worthy of a Patronus. When his mother reacted agreeably to the discovery of familial relation to Heri after only a few bewildered blinks, Heri thought he would drop dead from an apoplectic fit on the spot.

The riot that happened during the World Cup celebration was an event that Heri ended reading about in the papers the next day. Her friends and she had been awoken by a frantic Remus when the exaltations of cheer became cries of fright, and were sent back to Grimmauld Place via the emergency portkey that Sirius had made for Heri just in case. The three girls were whisked away before the danger got within half a mile of them.

*The Daily Prophet* had quotes from officials saying that the fuss was just some drunks losing their minds, but Heri was more inclined to believe the infinitely more straightforward Sirius. Her godfather had come home in the early morning with a wild glint in his eyes, going on about "wretched Death Eater bastards" and several choice words about those he suspected to be guilty. Cousin Narcissa's shifty husband was at the top of Sirius' list.

"You've changed your uniform! Oh, Heri, you'll get into so much trouble!"

It was September 1st again, and the Hogwarts Express was about twenty minutes away from Hogsmeade Station. Heri had spent the majority of the ride catching up with her more casual school-friends — and crying into Lucian's and Graham's shoulders that Marcus had graduated — before finding her way back to the compartment her crowd had more or less laid claim to. It had been a laid-back journey so far, but a trip on the Express just wouldn't be complete without someone exclaiming over something she did that they found shocking.

Heri paused in her conversation with Ernie about possible recruits for the Quidditch team and looked up from the scarf she was crocheting to see Hermione Granger gaping at her from the doorway of the compartment. The rest of Heri's usual crowd looked up as well, their conversations tapering off at the horrified exclamation, all looking bothered in one way or another.

"What's it to you, Granger?" Zacharias sneered, crossing his arms and leaning back in his seat. He had never made it a secret that he had no affection for the Gryffindor girl. (Then again, he had little affection for anyone.) "If she wanted to walk around in a pair of trousers and a rain smock, it would still be none of your business."
"Oh, let's not start," Heri said, addressing both self-righteous loons. "Yes, Hermione, I'm not in the standard kit. I doubt I'll be getting into any trouble though, so you don't have to worry yourself over it."

"No trouble?" said Hermione. "I don't know how strict Professor Sprout is, but Professor McGonagall takes the rules very seriously; if she sees you out of uniform, she'll be on you faster than blinking!"

Heri sighed a bit through her nose and put her work down on her lap.

"Really now, no need to fuss. I've checked the rule book from cover to cover, and there's absolutely nothing against adding a few touches to the uniform. In fact, from what I've read, what's currently accepted as the standard kit isn't even the actual official set anyway."

Hermione looked horribly ruffled.

"Isn't it? That can't be right!"

She seemed to be on the verge of whipping out her own copy of the rule book to verify it.

"If it isn't the official uniform," Ernie chimed in, a puzzled look on his face, "then why's it on the official supply list?"

"Is it?" asked Heri, a smile curving her lips. "From what I remember of the list from first year, it said something about work robes, a pointed hat, a cloak, and . . . gloves, I think."

Megan leaned forward eagerly to agree.

"That's right! I remember the seamstress I went to had to get the uniform separately from what was on the list!"

"But if that's true, what are we supposed to be wearing?" Hannah asked, looking confused.

"From what I could figure," said Heri, "the school administration has changes up the uniform every once in a while to keep up with the current fashion and economic standard of the nation. Rather considerate of them, I suppose. In any case, the only thing I found that was acknowledged as the official Hogwarts uniform is the original kit they used back when the school was first built: a black cassock — you know, like those robes Professor Snape wears — with a knee-length tabard in our House colours over it. It reminds me a lot of the outfit that the Catholics have their altar boys wear, to be honest."

"Are you serious?" asked Sally-Anne, aghast at the fashion disaster. "That's right out of the Dark Ages!"

"Well, it's not like it's hideous or anything, just astonishingly out-of-date." Heri shrugged. "So, since we're all technically in blatant violation of uniform anyway, a few alterations are hardly a big deal, now are they?"

Hermione looked as if she was only just holding herself back from scolding Heri for circumventing 'The Rules.'

Sally-Anne huffed in amusement.

"Alright then, Miss Clever, have it your way. What have you done to your kit anyway?"
Heri grinned and stood up to give them a better view.

"I'm actually really proud of it, you know? I went through some clothes we had in storage and altered some of the old Hogwarts' uniforms I found. This one's actually a pinafore dress, though you can't really tell with the cardigan I've got on. I think it's from the fifties, and skirt is sewn up and pleated differently from what's standard right now. Much easier to walk in."

Sally-Anne, resident fashion expert that she was, inspected the outfit carefully. She made a sound of interest.

"I like it. It's subtle, so I didn't notice it before, but it's not dowdy like the A-Line midi skirts everyone's wearing. It's a lot fuller too."

"I attached petticoats." Heri did a pretty twirl, revealing the edge of her lacy underskirts. "It didn't feel right without the extra volume. I attached petticoats to all of my skirts."

Sally-Anne nodded.

"It's a bit longer too; I'm surprised it doesn't make your legs look stumpy with the flats we wear. Guess you just have long legs."

Heri shrugged, whirling again idly, admiring the ruffle of her skirts.

"The older girls seem to like their skirts shorter right now, but I like the length of this one. The movement of the fabric is lot more elegant when you can walk without having to worry about flashing your knickers in the breeze, you know?"

Heri didn't mention that she had sewn runes into the hem to prevent the skirt from flying up pass twirling height. She also didn't mention the sequences to prevent burning and tearing that she had stitched into the inside seams. Nope. That was between her and Iolanthe, and Iolanthe wasn't in any condition to be telling anyone anything just yet.

"Can we not talk about knickers?" asked Zacharias, an uncomfortable, grumpy expression on his face. "I'd rather not hear about girls' undergarments."

"I would," Ernie cut in, a wicked leer on his face, leaning in with mock-eagerness. "By all means, please continue."

Hannah scoffed and swatted the Ernie on the arm.

"Down, boy, we're talking clothes here."

"Worrying about clothes when you could be focusing on something actually important," Hermione grumbled, crossing her arms and looking mightily unimpressed.

"Why are you even here?" Megan asked tetchily, a catty expression on her face.

Megan had disliked Hermione as much as Zacharias did since the time last year that the Gryffindor girl had arrived at the Hufflepuff table for the runes project. Hermione had sat in Megan's usual spot next to Heri, took up two extra places by putting her satchel and books beside her on the bench, and then refused to make room for the rest of the crowd (the ones that didn't take Ancient Runes) when they trickled in for lunch — something about needing her books within easy reach.

Megan had been snapped at for getting too close to Hermione's books when she sat down, and she had taken it as a personal affront. Zacharias made worse with one of his usual provoking
statements, on that occasion about Megan being replaced by "an even-more-annoying-but-at-least-useful loud-mouth." Megan had viewed Hermione as a persistent would-be usurper ever since despite any assurances Heri gave her.

Despite her calmer state-of-being since returning her Time-Turner, Hermione didn't have any more respect for Megan than the other girl did for her. It had something to do with her being of the opinion that Megan was much like Lavender Brown, even without the flirty attitude. She seemed to be of the opinion that the majority of Heri's friends were useless and were only holding her back. (Though from what she had never said.)

Hermione maintained her crossed arms and gave Megan a derisive look, caring nothing for her attitude.

"Neville's lost Trevor again. I've come to ask for help since we don't know anyone else that can do the Summoning Charm already."

"You couldn't have asked a prefect or an older student?" asked Wayne, finally deciding to join the conversation. It wasn't like him to say something without being directly addressed first, but it seemed that even he didn't care for Hermione's presence.

Hermione frowned harder.

"Neville and I don't know any older students, and the prefects currently on duty are Slytherins." She sent a pointed look at Heri. "They might not all be like Malfoy and his thugs, but they aren't exactly known for no-strings-attached favours either."

Heri shrugged and put her unfinished scarf — with an inscription to filter the air of hazardous substances worked into the decorative pattern — into her bag.

"It's no problem."

It turned out that it was a very good thing that Hermione had come to find Heri when she did, since it was discovered that Trevor had somehow opened a window a sliver and was in the process of squirming his way out when Heri summon'd him. Heri considered suggesting to Neville that he put some sort of tethering spell on his toad if he insisted on letting it remain outside of its tank, but she sympathised too much with Trevor to encourage his captivity.

_Dear Sirius,_

_I've had a far from relaxing dinner tonight — care to guess why? Never mind, I'll just tell you: The headmaster made an announcement before the meal that had very mixed reactions. On one hand, there's going an international tournament with a fabulous cash-prize — on the other, they've cancelled Quidditch for the whole school-year._

_They've cancelled Quidditch, Sirius. Forget the Triwizard Tournament that hasn't been held in over 200 years; they've cancelled Quidditch for an event that only one Hogwarts student will be participating in, and will take up only three days in total. In what reality does that make sense? Cedric, Hufflepuff's team captain, looked like he didn't know whether he wanted to cheer or cry._

_I suppose this is why you and Remus have been all smirks and insinuations for the last few days. If you wanted me to be surprised, consider me duly shocked. How did you even know about it? Have you been shaking down people for information behind my back? But anyway, will you be coming out to watch? I've heard that the Tournament is famous for_
dangerous creatures and extravagant shows of magic — that sounds right up your alley.

Love,

Heri

Barty Crouch Jr. knew that he wasn't a good man. He had known it from the day he had taken the Dark Lord's mark and participated in the torment of his master's foe. He felt no regret about it. Any feeling outside of the desire to see his master rise again and revel in dark magic had been wrung out of him during his incarceration in Azkaban and his following imprisonment under the Imperious Curse by his father. When his master instructed him to infiltrate Hogwarts by capturing Mad-Eye Moody and impersonating the paranoid ex-Auror, Barty felt nothing but excitement for doing his master's will.

Well, maybe not just excitement. There was a good deal of hatred within him at any given time; for his father; for those that opposed the Dark Lord; for those that denied their pledge to the Dark Lord and walked free; and of course, for the Potter girl. He was eager to carry out his master's will, as not only would it bring the Dark Lord to power, it would give him the chance to begin extracting revenge from those he saw fit.

Barty had made a fittingly disruptive entrance right in the middle of Dumbledore's beginning-of-term speech. He thought it was appropriate that he showed up during the announcement of the tournament that he would be rigging while wearing the face of a trusted comrade. The welcoming applause from the staff made it all the more delicious. He could feel the eyes of those twitchy little whelps on him as he staggered his way to the Head Table; it was amusing that they were so wary of him when they had no idea of his true identity.

When the Girl Who Lived was pointed out to him, Barty had been appropriately shocked. The girl was the shortest of her year, even shorter than some of the lower years, and was decidedly baby-faced. She was also a Hufflepuff, and the sweetest tempered one if the other professors were to be believed. She was so modest, they said, she was generous and was a hard-worker that tutored other students in her free time. She was a good student and they hadn't had a lick of trouble from her since she had arrived, being amongst the most cooperative students they knew of.

The praise of her was enough to make him sick.

On the day that the fourth-years had Defence Against the Dark Arts, Potter had arrived with a crowd of other Hufflepuffs surrounding her. It might have been his over-wrought mind playing tricks on him, but she seemed to exude an air of benevolence, as if she was the personification of Light. Fitting really, since to him she stood for everything he wanted to destroy.

Tucked in the crook of her elbow was a doll that was identical to her in looks and dress. It was approximately a foot in height and made out of china. On top of looking exactly like her, it wore a wide-eyed, soft expression on its face that lent extra sweet-'n'-fluffiness to the girl's winsome atmosphere. It's existence was also completely incongruent with the image of Heri Potter he'd had in his head.

Barty admitted that he'd had a very fixed idea of what the Potter girl would be like. She'd be tall and mature for her age, fitting for one that achieved the unachievable at such a tender age. She would be an arrogant Gryffindor that revelled in the adoration of the Light sheep that praised her for bringing the Dark Lord low. She would Dumbledore's little pet that he'd be grooming to eventually take his place as the principle opposition of all things Dark, and she'd be a little brat that had never had to work for anything in life, all the training and information she'd ever need handed to her on a
It was difficult realigning himself after the paradigm shift.

"You can put those away," Barty growled, when the students filled their seats. He stumped over to his desk and sat down. "Those books. You won't need them."

They returned the books to their bags, the children buzzed excitedly, obviously eager for a practical lesson.

Barty took out a register and began to call out names, his normal eye moving steadily down the list while the magical eye he had nicked from Moody swivelled around, fixing upon each student as he or she answered.

"Right then," he said, when the last person had declared themselves present. "I've had a letter from Professor Lupin about this class. Seems you've had a pretty thorough grounding in tackling Dark creatures — you've covered boggarts, Red Caps, hinkypunks, grindylows, kappas, and werewolves, is that right?"

There was a general murmur of assent.

"But you're behind — very behind — on dealing with curses," he said. "So I'm here to bring you up to scratch on what wizards can do to each other. I've got one year to teach you how to deal with Dark."

He gave a harsh laugh, and then clapped his gnarled hands together.

"So — straight into it. Curses. They come in many strengths and forms. Now, according to the Ministry of Magic, I'm supposed to teach you countercurses and leave it at that. I'm not supposed to show you what illegal Dark curses look like until you're in the sixth year. You're not supposed to be old enough to deal with it till then. But Professor Dumbledore's got a higher opinion of your nerves, he reckons you can cope, and I say, the sooner you know what you're up against, the better.

"How are you supposed to defend yourself against something you've never seen? A wizard who's about to put an illegal curse on you isn't going to tell you what he's about to do. He's not going to do it nice and polite to your face. You need to be prepared. You need to be alert and watchful. You need to put that away, Miss Brown, when I'm talking."

The Brown girl jumped in her seat and flushed at being caught. She obediently put away the sheet of parchment she had been showing to the girl next to her as Barty watched her steadily.

"So . . . do any of you know which curses are most heavily punished by law?"

Several hands rose tentatively into the air.

Barty's demonstration of the Imperius Curse on a spider had them laughing until he threatened to use it on them. That shut them up proper, all horrified at the thought of being controlled in such a way. They seemed hesitant to volunteer another answer after that, but two Gryffindors, a boy and a girl, raised their hands despite their reluctance. He was sure they regretted it when he cast the Cruciatons on the second spider.

The spider's legs bent into its body. It rolled over and began to twitch horribly, rocking from side to side. The brats didn't like it at all, not even the Death Eater whelps that sat in the back and thought they were seasoned Dark wizards. The spider started to shudder and jerk more violently —
"Stop it!" shrieked the Gryffindor girl that volunteered before. She was looking not at the spider, but at the one that had suggested the Cruciatus, the Longbottom lad. The boy's hands were clenched upon the desk in front of him, his knuckles white, his eyes wide and horrified.

Barty released the spell to all the students' visible relief. Wet-behind-the-ears runts, the lot of them. He shrunk the spider back to its original size and put it back in the jar.

"Pain," he said eventually. "You don't need thumbscrews or knives to torture someone if you can perform the Cruciatus Curse. That one was very popular once too. Anyone know any others?"

Despite her shaking, that audacious girl raised her hand again.

"Yes, Granger?"

"Avada Kedavra," she whispered.

Several people looked uneasily around at her. The circle that the Potter girl had surrounding her actually glared at Granger, appearing to try to close ranks while remaining in their seats. If the Potter girl appreciated the sentiment or even cared about what Granger had said, she gave no sign of it; instead, she stared calmly at the notes she was taking and idly stroked her doll's hair.

"Ah," said Barty, a slight smile twisting his lopsided mouth. "Yes, the last and arguably the worst. Avada Kedavra . . . the Killing Curse."

He retrieved the last spider and placed it upon the desktop. It started to scuttle frantically across the wooden surface.

"Avada Kedavra!" he roared.

There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound, as though a vast, invisible something was soaring through the air — instantaneously the spider rolled over onto its back, unmarked, but unmistakably dead. Several of the students failed to stifle their cries.

"Not nice," he said calmly. "Not pleasant. And there's no countercurse. There's no blocking it. Only one known person has ever survived it, and she's sitting right in front of me."

The Potter girl's cheeks reddened as all eyes fell on her. She hugged her doll tighter but said nothing in acknowledgement.

"Avada Kedavra's a curse that needs a powerful bit of magic behind it," Barty eventually said, drawing attention back to himself. "You lot could all get your wands out now and point them at me and say the words, and I doubt I'd get so much as a nosebleed. But that doesn't matter. I'm not here to teach you how to do it.

"Now, if there's no countercurse, why am I showing you? Because you've got to know. You've got to appreciate what the worst is. You don't want to find yourself in a situation where you're facing it. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he roared, and the whole class jumped again.

"Those three curses — Avada Kedavra, Imperius, and Cruciatus — are known as the Unforgivable Curses. The use of any one of them on a fellow human being is enough to earn a life sentence in Azkaban. That's what you're up against. That's what I've got to teach you to fight. You need preparing. You need arming. But most of all, you need to practice constant, never-ceasing vigilance. Get out your quills . . . copy this down . . ."

They spent the rest of the lesson taking notes on each of the Unforgivable Curses. No one spoke
until the bell rang — but when Barty finally dismissed them, a torrent of talk burst forth.

As the crowd of chattering students swept out of the classroom, Barty noted that Potter drew the Longbottom boy into the midst of the herd of Hufflepuffs, pulling him along to walk arm in arm with her.

"Come on, Neville," he could see her lips forming the words. "Let's get you a nice cup of tea."

With an imperceptible glance and an unwavering disapproving frown in Barty's direction, Potter ushered the still distressed boy out of the room.

For reasons beyond Barty's comprehension, his stomach churned in the same way it did when the Dark Lord expressed his displeasure with him.

Heri looked up from the book she was reading at the sound of confusion from the person next to her.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Sally-Anne mumbled, casting an annoyed look at her notebook.

It was the second week of term and all classes were in full swing, the hustle of lessons as active as ever. The excitement over the Tournament had died down a bit when the daily grind set in and now it was only discussed during free periods instead of up and down the corridors as it had during the first few days.

Out of the two that had Time-Turners the year before, Heri was the only one still making use of hers. Hermione had turned hers in at the end of last year after she finally accepted that she wasn't capable of using it to the desired effect. Without the Gryffindor girl acting as an ever-present pressure to obey the rules strictly, Heri had taken to sneaking in a few turns of the hourglass for other academic (though personal) pursuits.

It wasn't as if she was goofing off! Professor McGonagall had said the Time-Turner was for her studies, and Heri sure as Hell was studying things in depth during her extra hours. She would likely be the very top of the class in Ancient Runes, Ghoul Studies, and divination for all the extra effort she was putting into them. She knew that some people thought she flew through lessons with minimum effort, but it wasn't possible for anyone to be good at everything, and if there was one thing Heri was familiar with, it was hard work. Hard work was a given when you were often begrudged the very air you breath. Still, to maintain her image, she had taken to doing the majority of her assignments either under her invisibility cloak during her repeated days — when she only needed to be seen in public during her extra electives — or in her stolen moments.

On this day, being Friday, Heri was taking advantage of the fact that all her assignments for the week were already completed to build onto her image of not needing to put in effort. While her friends and hanger-ons buckled down to finish up for the weekend, she was reading a graphic novel about the adventures of a gutsy warrior-in-training during the era of an ancient Japanese civilisation that used their magic as a tool for warcraft. She had been utterly absorbed in a moving dialogue by Maelstrom (the main character) when Sally-Anne made her displeasure known.

"What's wrong?" Heri asked, marking her page and putting her book down.

"Divination assignment," Sally-Anne sighed. "You know the one. We're supposed to keep a log of predictions we make every day using the methods we've been taught. Then we're supposed to compile the predictions and explain what we think it means."
"So, what's the problem?"

"I've got a prediction here that I can't make heads or tails of: *Three will be expected, but four will come.*"

Heri thought on it.

"Yes, this does sound like a tricky one. I can't say for certain, but I think we can safely infer that there will be an unexpected result. The question, of course, is what is that result?

"From a numerological standpoint, three is a prime number and is thought as powerful, often associated with the divine. Four is the first non-prime number, but it's symbolic of balance. On the surface, three becoming four sounds like a good thing, alluding to a possibly godly power growing to become balanced. Of course, that's just a vague interpretation of a vague prediction."

"But what if it's meant to be taken literally?" asked Sally-Anne after she had scribbled down notes. "Like, forget Numerology and symbolism, what if three people are supposed to get somewhere, but an extra person arrives as well?"

"Well, that's also a valid interpretation." Heri nodded. "Pretty much anything can go at the moment. Taking it the way you're saying, it could be an omen as well. Three expected people with an unknown fourth; maybe three known obstacles with an unpredictable extra. Or out of a group of something, the third option is supposed to happen, but the fourth occurs instead. If it's supposed to be a warning, you could take it as 'be wary around that which comes in trios, a fourth will accompany them.'"

Heri placed her forefinger to her lips in thought.

"Which medium did you use?"

"I don't remember. It's written down for the day we got this assignment, but I can't remember even writing it down."

"We started on star-charts that day, maybe was it that?"

"Mmm . . . maybe. I honestly don't remember anything about it."

"Hmm, you might want to put down all possible interpretations then. We could have narrowed it down a bit if you used playing cards or rune-stones or something, but it's vague enough to come from augury."

Sally-Anne eventually nodded her thanks and fell back into silence as she continued with writing the rest of her predictions.

Heri then settled back into her book, wondering how Maelstrom was succeeding at making such a moving speech to the leader of the opposition while a countless number of doppelgängers he had created laid waste to the invading force right in front of them. Such charisma and way with people was admirable. Such skill with magic was impressive too.

The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang arrived with much fanfare the day before Halloween. It seemed like the other two school were trying to be impressive, as Beauxbatons arrived in a massive carriage pulled by flying horses, and Durmstrang came out of the Black Lake like a submarine resurfacing in an ominous ship that wouldn't have looked out of place in a pirate's fleet.
After the appropriate amount of posturing, everyone was ushered back inside the Great Hall. Four extra seats had been placed at the Head table, and any confusion as to why it wasn't just two was relieved when two gentlemen were led in by Professor McGonagall.

When the evening meal was finished, the headmaster introduced two additions that had joined the educators at the Head table.

"For those who do not know them, Mr. Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament, and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions' efforts."

At the mention of the word 'champions,' the attentiveness of the listening students seemed to sharpen. Perhaps Professor Dumbledore had noticed their sudden stillness, for he smiled as he said, "The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch."

Mr. Filch, who had been lurking unnoticed in a far corner of the Hall, now approached Professor Dumbledore carrying a great wooden chest encrusted with jewels. It looked extremely old.

"The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman," said Professor Dumbledore as Mr. Filch placed the chest carefully on the table before him, "and they have made the necessary arrangements for each challenge. There will be three tasks, and they will test the champions in many different ways . . . their magical prowess — their daring — their powers of deduction — and, of course, their ability to cope with danger."

At this last word, the Hall was filled with a silence so absolute that nobody seemed to be breathing.

"As you know, three champions compete in the tournament," the headmaster went on calmly. "One from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire."

Professor Dumbledore now took out his wand and tapped three times upon the top of the casket. The lid creaked slowly open. He reached inside it and pulled out a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It would have been entirely unremarkable had it not been full to the brim with dancing blue-white flames.

"Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet," said Professor Dumbledore. "Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete."

"To ensure that no under-age student yields to temptation, I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line."

That had been last night. In the time between then and now, at least five students had been sent to the Hospital Wing after they had tried to trick the Age Line and ended up being flung out of the
circle with beards nearly as long as Dumbledore's. Chatter had been going around the school all day about which of the older students were entering and which would be the likeliest to be chosen. Every House had at least one or two students that had entered publicly.

In Hufflepuff, everyone was rooting for Cedric to be chosen. When he had gotten over the distress all the Quidditch players were in, he had been amongst the first to submit his name for the Goblet. Once he had shown interest, Heri began hearing murmurs about several of the sixth- and seventh-years that were of age submitting Cedric's name in a show of solidarity. Truth be told, out of the older Hufflepuffs, Cedric really was the likeliest candidate; he was top of his class, quick with a spell in Defence, and was athletic to boot. If any Hufflepuff was going to be chosen, it was going to be Cedric Diggory.

Heri and her friends showed up early to secure seats directly at the end of the table nearest to the professors so they would be able to witness the selection directly. This proved to be the smart thing to do, as not long after they had sat down, more students came pouring in thirty to twenty minutes before dinner would officially start.

Through a combination of the meal being their second feast in two days and the excited buzz in the air, Heri didn't fancy the extravagantly prepared food as much as she would have normally. Like everyone else in the hall, she simply wanted the plates to clear, and to hear who had been selected as champions. Judging by the constantly craning necks, the impatient expressions on every face, the fidgeting, and the standing up to see whether the professors had finished eating yet, there was less patience going around than usual.

At long last, the golden plates returned to their original spotless state; there was a sharp upswing in the level of noise within the Hall, which died away almost instantly as Professor Dumbledore got to his feet. On either side of him, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime looked as tense and expectant as anyone.

"Well, the Goblet is almost ready to make its decision," said the headmaster. "I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions' names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber" — he indicated the door behind the staff table — "where they will be receiving their first instructions."

He took out his wand and gave a great sweeping wave with it. At once, all the candles except those inside the carved pumpkins were extinguished, plunging them into a state of semi-darkness. The Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole hall, the sparkling bright, bluey-whiteness of the flames almost painful on the eyes. Everyone watched, waiting . . .

The flames inside the goblet turned suddenly red again. Sparks began to fly from it. Next moment, a tongue of flame shot into the air, a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it — the whole room gasped.

Professor Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and held it at arm's length so that he could read it by the light of the flames, which had turned back to blue-white.

"The champion for Durmstrang," he read, in a clear, distinct voice, "will be Viktor Krum."

A storm of applause and cheering swept the Great Hall. Heri saw Krum rise from the Slytherin table and slouch up toward Dumbledore. He turned right, walked along the staff table, and disappeared through the door into the next chamber.

Again and again did the Goblet flare a burst of flame that carried its selection into the air to the cheer and despair of the audience. The third time Professor Dumbledore plucked a parchment from
the flames, all of Hogwarts held their breath until —

"Cedric Diggory!"

If there were any protests from the other Houses, the uproar from the Hufflepuff table was too great to be heard over.

"CE-DRIC! CE-DRIC! CE-DRIC!" the chant was taken up amongst those that weren’t lost in wordless exhilaration.

Every single Hufflepuff had jumped to his or her feet, screaming, and stamping, and generally making fools of themselves as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers’ table. Heri jumped and whooped with the best of them, exchanging hugs with everyone around her as they screamed, hollered, and banged on the table. Indeed, the applause for Cedric went on so long that it was some time before Professor Dumbledore could make himself heard again.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore called happily as at last the tumult died down. "Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real —"

Professor Dumbledore was cut off by a fizzling crackle from the Goblet.

Gasps and cries of shock rang out as a column of fire erupted from the Goblet and shot up into the rafters. The flames bled blue and white from the intensity of the heat. The tongue of fire swirled into itself and condensed into a writhing fireball as they gaped. Before anything could be done, it stopped abruptly in its climb.

It then came hurtling back down.

Straight at the Hufflepuff table.

Heri didn’t have time to think, her battle-instinct had gone into overdrive, causing her to jump to her feet the second the fire had erupted. Power rushing through her limbs, Heri grabbed the long table with both hands and flung it away with all her strength, sending the table, the benches connected to it, and the seated students screeching back into the far wall.

The fireball was upon her when —

WHUMP! FssssSSSSHHHH— BTOOM!

Heri had thrown herself backwards onto her rear and let her fist swing. Despite how fire was definitely not a solid, she had pounded it away into one of the high windows used for owls. The collision of an extremely hot fire with stone and glass blasted a gaping hole a good six feet in diameter in the wall.

Heri curled into herself, panting and clutching her still clenched fist to her chest. She did not go unscathed from impact; on top of the horrible blistering and charred flesh of her hand and forearm, she could feel broken bones in her knuckles and maybe even her wrist.

"POTTER/HERI!" was exclaimed all over the Hall.

Her friends came scrambling from every table as the professors sprang forward to reach her. Hands grabbed her all over.
In the clamber of getting to Heri, the fire in the goblet had turned red again, earning loud shrieks of alarm. Sparks flew out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Automatically, Professor Dumbledore reached out seized the parchment. He held it out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause in which the headmaster stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room couldn't help but stare at him in return.

And then Professor Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out: "Heri Potter."

Fucking crickets.

There were no words.

"What?" Heri breathed. She looked around with wide eyes as her voice rose in disbelief. "What?"

Professors Sprout and McGonagall on either side of Heri helped her to her feet as her friends hovered frantically.

Dumbledore looked grim.

"Professor Sinistra, if you could fetch Madam Pomfrey? Professor Flitwick, would you be so good as to patch Miss Potter up until Madam Pomfrey arrives?"

Both teachers sprang into action, Professor Sinistra all but running from the hall and Professor Flitwick wielding his wand gravely.

"Would you ladies please escort Miss Potter into the side-chamber?"

"B-but . . . What?" Heri cried, confusion all over her. "I-I-I didn't . . . What's going on?"

But the headmaster was adamant.

"This is a discussion best held without an audience."

Heri was led through the door out of the Great Hall and into a smaller room, lined with paintings of witches and wizards. A handsome fire was roaring in the fireplace opposite of the door.

Krum, Cedric, and Delacour were grouped around the fire. They looked strangely impressive, silhouetted against the flames. Krum, hunched-up and brooding, was leaning against the mantelpiece, slightly apart from the other two. Cedric was standing with his hands behind his back, staring into the fire. Fleur Delacour looked around when Heri was brought in and frowned.

"What 'as 'appened?" she asked, drawing the attention of the boys.

Heri was ushered to a chair where Professor Flitwick did his best to ease some of her pain and repair what he could.

"Heri?" cried Cedric. He rushed over and grabbed her shoulder, eyeing her damaged limb with alarm. "Merlin! What's happened?! Why are you hurt?!"

"A questioned we'd all like answered, Mr. Diggory," said Professor Dumbledore, coming through the door at a brisk pace. Behind him came the foreign head-teachers and both Ministry officials.

Mr. Bagman came in with an expression that looked as worried as it was awed.
Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen . . . lady," he added, approaching the fireside and addressing the other three. "May I introduce — incredible though it may seem — the fourth Triwizard champion?"

Krum straightened up. His surly face darkened as he surveyed Heri. Cedric looked nonplussed. He looked from Bagman to Heri and back again as though sure he must have misheard what Bagman had said. Delacour, however, flipped her hair back, frowning, and said, "Eez now ze time for jokes, Meester Bagman?"

"Joke?" Bagman repeated, bewildered. "No, no, not at all! Heri's name just came out of the Goblet of Fire!"

There was much arguing after that. Heated words went back and forth over the Goblets irregular actions and its selection of Heri. The Hogwarts professors were distressed by the near-immolation of a table of their students and the injury Heri suffered. The foreign instructors, while bewildered and horrified at the terrible incident that was only just avoided, were disturbed by the fact that another Hogwarts student had been chosen.

"But zair 'as been a mistake!" Delacour said. "She cannot compete. She eez too young!"

Bagman only too eagerly contradicted Delacour's assertion.

"The age restriction was only imposed this year as an extra safety measure. And as her name's come out of the goblet . . . I mean, I don't think there can be any ducking out at this stage . . . It's down in the rules, you're obliged. Heri will just have to do the best she —"

"I have?" Heri interrupted. She was being fussed over Madam Pomfrey as Cedric stood on her other side and held her hand in support. She sent the Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports a dubious look. "Why? I didn't enter my name; why am I obligated to do anything?"

"So you say you didn't enter?" asked Karkaroff, his smile steely and his eyes hard.

Heri was not cowed. In an even tone, she said, "I certainly did not, sir."

"Ah, but of course she is lying!" cried Madame Maxime, looking very put out.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?" The chill in Heri's voice could have brought on the next Ice Age. She only just refrained from baring her teeth. "I'd like to know what you think you know of my character that you believe that you can just call me a liar without care or hesitation!"

Her eyes were glowing with ire. She remained seated only because of the two on either side of her that were holding onto her.

"I don't take such accusations lightly, ma'am!"

"Here now, Heri," murmured Cedric, visibly disturbed by her unusual show of temper. He rubbed her back in a soothing motion. "No need to get worked up about it."

"Cedric, I've just had a tussle with a ball of fire hot enough to melt flesh that came out of a cup that's supposed to judge worthiness for a competition, and then I had my name come flying out for the aforementioned competition which I have no business being involved in." Heri's tone was uncompromising. "I want answers, not pointed fingers."
"Miss Potter is quite right," said Professor Sprout, frowning at the French headmistress. "She has never been known to flout the rules and doesn't deserve to be accused for something she is the victim of."

"Mr. Crouch . . . Mr. Bagman," said Karkaroff, his voice unctuous once more, "you are our — er — objective judges. Surely you will agree that this is most irregular?"

Mr. Crouch spoke in his usual curt voice.

"We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament."

"I insist upon resubmitting the names of the rest of my students," said Karkaroff. He had dropped his unctuous tone and his smile; his face wore a very ugly look indeed. "You will set up the Goblet of Fire once more, and we will continue adding names until each school has two champions. It's only fair, Dumbledore."

"But it doesn't work like that," said Bagman. "The Goblet of Fire's just gone out — it won't reignite until the start of the next tournament —"

"— in which Durmstrang will most certainly not be competing!" exploded Karkaroff. "I have half a mind to leave now!"

"Empty threat, Karkaroff," growled a voice from near the door. "You can't leave your champion now. He's got to compete. They've all got to compete. Binding contract, like Dumbledore said. Convenient, eh?"

Moody had just entered the room. He limped toward the fire, and with every right step he took, there was a loud clunk.

"Convenient?" said Karkaroff. "I'm afraid I don't understand you, Moody."

"Don't you?" said Moody quietly. "It's very simple, Karkaroff. Someone put Potter's name in that goblet knowing she'd have to compete if it came out."

"Evidently, someone 'oo wished to give 'Ogwarts two bites at ze apple!" said Madame Maxime.

"The Goblet's been tampered with and all you care about is the fact that another student had been chosen?" asked Professor McGonagall, the lines on her face deepening with her displeasure.

"What evidence is zere of zat?" said Madame Maxime, throwing up her huge hands.

"A very powerful magical object has been hoodwinked!" roared Moody. "It would have needed an exceptionally strong Confundus Charm to bamboozle that goblet into forgetting that only three schools compete in the tournament . . . I'm guessing they submitted Potter's name under a fourth school, to make sure she was the only one in her category . . ."

"We all know that Professor Moody considers the morning wasted if he hasn't discovered six plots to murder him before lunchtime," said Karkaroff loudly. "Apparently he is now teaching his students to fear assassination too. An odd quality in a Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Dumbledore, but no doubt you had your reasons."

"Are we all just going to ignore the fact that a fireball exploded out of the Goblet and nearly killed nearby students?" Heri cut in impatiently. "I assumed that was unusual behaviour, but it must be a regular thing to cull the crowd if you're all just going to gripe about an extra champion instead of the
"Quite right," Professor Dumbledore said, his face unhappy. "Our first priority should be the safety of the children. I think it's been made obvious that the Goblet has been tampered with, and it is clear that whoever did so has little care for anyone that might get injured in the meantime."

"We have yet to disprove that the girl somehow entered herself and mucked it up enough to cause disaster," said Karkaroff, a sneer on his face.

Heri had had enough.

"Come off it!" she snapped, her enunciation becoming noticeably less civil. "I'm fourteen years old for Merlin's sake! What d'you expect me to do against an enchantment of a fully trained wizard near a hundred years my senior?"

Madam Pomfrey had finished with her hand, so Heri got to her feet and went over to Professor Dumbledore. She took a breath through her nose and released it before holding out her hand.

"May I see the parchment if you please, sir?"

The headmaster handed the singed scrap to her.

Heri looked at it and scoffed.

"There are so many things wrong with this thing. There's no school written down next to my name for one. This isn't even my handwriting either!" She gave a significant look to the two ministry officials. "Surely it can't be binding if it wasn't me that put my name in or even wrote the name?"

Mr. Bagman punctured that small hope.

"It was quite common back in the beginning for people to submit the names of others. Often it was the people who were nominated that were chosen to represent their school."

Heri sighed.

"This is ridiculous!"

There was a moment of agitated silence.

"How this situation arose, we do not know," said Professor Dumbledore at long last, speaking to everyone gathered in the room. "We will have to remove the Goblet of Fire from the school to be checked over for its malfunctions, but it seems to me that we have no choice but to accept its decision. Both Cedric and Heri have been chosen to compete in the Tournament. This, therefore, they will do."

"Ah, but Dumbly-dorr —"

"My dear Madame Maxime, if you have an alternative, I would be delighted to hear it."

Professor Dumbledore waited, but Madame Maxime did not speak, she merely glared. She wasn't the only one either; Karkaroff livid.

"Well, shall we crack on, then?" Bagman said, rubbing his hands together and smiling around the room. "Got to give our champions their instructions, haven't we? Barty, want to do the honours?"

Mr. Crouch seemed to come out of a deep reverie.
"Yes," he said. "Instructions. Yes . . . the first task . . ."

Heri and Cedric return to the dorms both very dissatisfied. The agitated crowd that had been waiting for them had mixed feelings when they were told that Heri was required to compete as well. On one hand, Hogwarts having two champions was unfair and came about through someone tampering with the Goblet of Fire; on the other hand, both champions for Hogwarts were Hufflepuffs, both were heavily popular for their own merits, and both were known for being talented. It seemed that the outcome was actually heavily in Hufflepuff’s favour despite the sketchy means.

Heri threw herself into her usual seat between Sally-Anne and Hannah when everyone had calmed down enough to pretend to go back to the usual night's routine even as the chatter about the Tournament was used as background noise to their studying and faffing about. She sighed heavily through her nose when her friends asked if she was alright.

"*Three will be expected, but four will come,*" Heri said eventually. She looked at Sally-Anne and smiled wryly. "This is one interpretation we didn't consider."

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**Dear Sirius,**

Due to the unfortunate luck that plagues me whenever Halloween comes around, I've destroyed part of the Great Hall with a fireball I punched and got chosen as a fourth champion for the Triwizard Tournament. I hope you realize that you and Remus are now obligated to come and watch whether you had been planning to or not.

I would ask you to contact your solicitor, but, apparently, the contract is magically binding. Did I mention that I hate Halloween? Well, I do.

Love,

*Heri*

P.S. Please tell Auntie Andromeda to send me a pair of gloves that are unassuming enough to be worn casually, but are nice enough that I can wear them with dress-robes. The fireball that I punched was made from the flames of the Goblet of Fire; apparently, magically-induced burn scars are like curse scars and can't be undone. I would be more upset, but the scars are flame-shaped and actually look really wicked.

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On another plane of existence, the body of a man was stretched out across a thick mattress and soft sheets. His breath was even and deep, the slow inhalation of a person in a deep slumber. All was quiet, the silence of the chamber as calm as an undiscovered tomb.

Suddenly, the man jolted, his head turning to the side as if turning to look at someone. With a groan, a bleary eye cracked open, the colour a dark forest green. The gaze was unfocused and soon slid closed again, the man drawing in a deep breath before going limp once again.

October 31st, he thought as he drifted back to sleep. It was her birthday.

Chapter End Notes
AN1: Shout-out to jbern's The Inner Eye of Harry Potter for the Divination discussion between Heri and Sally-Anne. I recommend this story if you like Ravenclaw!Harry, light bashing of canon MCs, and Harry acting like an 'average' teenage boy. I admit, the two latter qualifications don't usually suit me, but I know a strong story when I read one. It's unfinished though, so don't get too attached.

AN2: You might have noticed that I occasionally write jinx'd instead of jinxed, or summon'ing instead of summoning. I do this to differentiate between the performance of a type of spell from the non-magical action. "We were doing fine until he jinxed it" and "It was an ordinary door until he jinx'd it" mean two completely different things. Both forms are actually correct English, just from different time periods -- the 'apostrophe d' form is the original spelling of how we pronounce the words now.
Bane and Firenze were displeased at hearing of Heri's participation in the Triwizard Tournament. 'Displeased' was almost an understatement with the way Bane had cursed the idiocy of wizards and their magical bindings that did as much harm to themselves as they did to other creatures. They then decided that it was imperative that she spend the entirety of the time she didn't spend in class on repeated days honing her skills in the Forest.

Since that day, Heri was worked into the ground — both her instructors agreed that they couldn't waste any time in whipping her into proper physical condition to compete against students bigger and older than herself. In effect, the Forest's population of acromantulas and other aggressive monsters was at its lowest as a result.

Joining them in Heri's training were a handful of dryads and other nature Beings whom the centaurs had convinced to help. While sweet-faced and retiring in personality, those ladies ran Heri through the wringer with exercises on flexibility and light-footedness. As she huffed and puffed behind the tree nymphs that ran like the wind through the greenery, Heri acknowledged that she normally made an awful lot of noise as she sprinted at a speed not that much faster than the average human. Oh, sure, she was as evasive as any nymph, but she wasn't yet anywhere near as fast. Still, she liked to imagine that her stealth and evasion could now be likened to those of a ninja.

The nymphs kindly hammered speed into her skinny limbs — some of them took to chasing after her with swords that they had already proved that they were willing to use. Nothing like increasing your speed by running for your fucking life.

On top of physical work, the nymphs began teaching her their kind of magic. It turned out that some of them had been witches before; while many had been born nature spirits, others had been transformed by deities they had encountered long, long ago. While their magic was different enough that there were things Heri would never be able to do — Outrun gods; photosynthesise; travel tree-to-tree through the ground — she could (eventually) learn to meld into the body of a tree and even transform herself into a plant. It was slow going, but she hoped to be able to perform at least one of the skills being taught to her before the Tasks started.

(Though she didn't know what good turning into a tree would do her outside of the off-chance that one of the Tasks involved avoiding detection. Well, whatever. The nymphs wanted to teach her, and at the very least she would have the option available to her if a situation ever called for it.)

During one of Heri's training periods, Hedwig arrived in a flutter of feathers and squawks of bird-cries. On that day, she was a larger than average raven, and she took plain delight in landing on Bane's back, making the centaur snort and stamp at the uninvited extra weight.

"Hello, lovey," said Heri, easing out of the stretch she was in. She sat up and crossed her legs under her. It was almost time for Heri to return to the castle, so the nymphs had already left after assigning her usual post-workout cool-downs. "Do you have a letter for me already?"

Heri had sent out one of her bi-weekly letters to Sirius only yesterday, so she hadn't been expecting a response so quickly.

"No letter!" Hedwig rasped, making use of the advance syrinx of the corvus genus. She galloped
a bit on Bane's back, much to his agitation. "Gift! Gift!"

Heri frowned in confusion.

"Sirius sent me a gift instead of a letter? But I already have the gloves I asked for."

Auntie Andromeda had sent via Sirius above and beyond the all-occasion gloves Heri had asked for. Along with their fretting letters about the scarring and the danger she was in, Heri had received a pair of very practical half-finger gloves made from mooncalf hide. Mooncalves had thin, almost papery grey skin, which translated into a leather that was as fine and flexible as rice paper. On top of integrating them into her everyday wear so others would not stare at her new scarring, she had taken to wearing them during her training, as they aided her grip on top of looking fabulous.

"Not dog-man!" Hedwig squawked.

Heri's expression turned into one of exasperation.

"Have you been letting people use you to bring things to me again? Hedwig, you can't trust just anyone! What if they try to hurt you or send a hexed letter or something?"

"Not hexed!"

"And how would you —?"

"Not! Hexed!" Hedwig insisted. She stuck out her left fore-leg to reveal not a letter, but a pouch attached.

Heri huffed.

"I suppose I'll have to take your word for it."

The pouch was plainly coloured but was made of a soft material Heri couldn't identify. Not willing to forgo caution, she sprouted a tendril from under the back of her shirt and used it to untie the pouch from Hedwig's leg. She sprouted another to reach into the opening. It seemed to have an Expansion Charm on it — Heri's immaterial limb reached in a lot farther than it should have been able to.

Drawing her appendage back, she pulled out something smoothed and curved.

When her eyes landed on the thing, Heri couldn't help but gape. What? But how? It couldn't be...

"Basilisk fang?" said Bane, his face as slack as hers. "Who would send such a kingly gift?"

Heri's extra appendages withdrew back into her body, letting said kingly gift drop into her hands.

In her grasp was a finely crafted slingshot made out of what was unmistakably the basilisk fang she had sacrificed to her godly parent back in second year. Here it was again, but this time it had been polished to a pearlescent shine and capped with a silvery metal on the tip and the crown of the tooth. The crown had been shaved down, shaping it into twin prongs, and metal links attached the bands to it. The curved fang the size of a buffalo's horn fit comfortably in her slacked grip.

In wonder, Heri ran her fingers down the metal capping at the bottom, noticing that it wasn't as tight around the pointed end as it was on the prongs. Without thought, she held the slingshot in both hands and pull the two ends apart, giving a small sound when the capping proved to actually be a
sheath. The fang was as sharp as ever, and she could see that it was still venomous from the way the tip glistened yellow.

"I suppose this means they're paying more attention than I originally thought," said Heri, her tone detached as she was lost in admiring her new weapon. "I wonder if this counts as divine intervention."

Heri shifted forward in her seat, gripping a crayon firmly as she brought the blue tip of it to the parchment. With her tongue against the corner of her mouth, she pressed the coloured wax onto the page, curving it around to make a perfect circle.

Ah, runes. Marvellous things, really, especially when one was too young to do wand-magic outside of school.

It was a week away from the First Task, and Heri was taking a break from her training in dealing with a dragon.

A few days ago, Hagrid had learned that dragons were brought in when the Weasley boy he was good friends with — Charlie, the dragon-tamer — invited him out to see them as a treat. Hagrid, in turn, invited Madame Maxime — whom he fancied — and Heri to come see them with him.

Hidden under her invisibility cloak, Heri had watched with wide eyes as the massive beasts tore into their food and thrashed in their cages.

The time she didn't spend working to the bone in the Forest was spent scouring the library with her friends. After warning Cedric about the dragons, she had told her friends about what she would be facing. They had been aghast and insisted that they help her research how to deal with dragons. She hadn't entered the tournament of her own free will, and she certainly wasn't anywhere near as trained in magic as the three other champions, so it was only right that she had a boost to reach their level. At least, that was what Hannah insisted as she inducted Neville and Luna into joining their cause as well.

"Wouldn't Hermione be a better choice for this?" Neville asked at one point, looking overwhelmed by the stacks of books they had found on dragons. "She's brilliant at these kinds of things, you know . . ."

All present Hufflepuffs minus Heri had donned an expression like Neville just flung manure in their faces.

"If I wanted my ears eaten off and then spoken to like I was still figuring out how to say 'Mummy'," Zacharias then sneered, "I'd donate both ears and a fresh carving out of my brain to a starving zombie. At least then there'd be an excuse for her to talk as if she's so much more clever than the rest of us!"

"As opposed to how you talk like you think the same?" Sally-Anne had scoffed, leaning over to look at the book Luna was reading.

"You saying you want her hanging about?" Megan chimed in, wrinkling her nose and grimacing.

Sally-Anne flicked her braid off her shoulder.

"All I'm saying is that Granger is hardly the most offensive person around even if I don't want her here nattering at me."
"What about Ginny, or Ron, or Fred and George?" Luna suggested after that, turning a page. "Their brother, Charlie, works at a dragon reserve — they might know a thing or two about dragons."

Heri had regretfully shook her head before any other comments could be made.

"Charlie's here as one of the dragon-tamers for the tournament. I don't want to risk getting him or Hagrid in trouble — they might let a comment slip in their common room, and I know a good many gossips in Gryffindor would have it around school before the end of the day."

"Yeah, never mind that Ginny's always gagging for it like the rest of the groupies," Megan then jeered, tilting her nose up.

"Oh, you wanna talk about gagging for it, do you?" Zacharias butted back in at the same time that Luna said, "Don't talk about my friend like that," her usual misty eyes sharpening with intent.

Neville didn't dare add anything other suggestion to add onto the team after that, not when more snapping and hissing followed. Luckily for him, the conversation soon devolved into fretting over the dangers of the First Task.

Heri could understand where her friends were coming from with their concern, so she didn't let it bother her that they were even more clingy than usual. Usually, she could slip away by herself every once in a while on a non-repeated day, but now they travelled in a pack literally everywhere — the boys even loitered outside the loo for them. It was even worse than the time in second year when she was being accused of genocide!

It was annoying, but she knew it made them feel better to be in a large group; it was that pack mentality seemingly inherent to Hufflepuffs.

What did bother Heri was that Rita Skeeter woman and her constant hounding for an interview.

Heri had had the dubious pleasure of meeting the noxious Ms. Skeeter at the Weighing of the Wands wherein Mr. Ollivander had been brought in to check if the champions' wands were in working order.

"Ah, yes," Ollivander had said when it was Heri's turn. He greeted her with a bright grin and a gleam in his eyes. "Yes, yes, yes, I remember this wand well. Holly and phoenix feather with a pomegranate handle. A wand that will aid in much greatness. Did I inform you before that the feather comes from the generous Fawkes, Headmaster Dumbledore's marvellous familiar?"

Skeeter's enchanted quill went flying across her parchment at that. A predatory smile had alighted her face.

Ollivander then conjured a fountain of wine and returned it with a fond tilt of his lips.

"No doubt it has already witnessed a measure of the things you will achieve."

"Miss Potter, we haven't gotten an interview or an individual photograph of you yet!" Skeeter had cried when Heri had made her escape at the end.

"Terribly sorry!" Heri had said, feigning an apologetic look as she hurried away. "But I've already missed the end of my last lesson and I don't want to be late for my next one! If you really need an individual photo of me, contact my personal photographer, Colin Creevey!"

Colin was ecstatic when Heri found him later on and made her previous bluff a reality. With an
actual contract that she then sent to be filed by Sirius' solicitor, she had him on record as the only person with the legal right to take professional photos of her and distribute them publicly.

Skeeter was not happy at all when Colin took advantage of his new position to deny Skeeter's request, citing the lack of an appointment and written inquiry as his reasons. Ever since, the troublesome tart had been hounding Heri's footsteps.

Heri had read the drivel that passed as news articles that the woman wrote, and wanted absolutely nothing to do with her. On such occasions that Skeeter tried to approach her, Heri was enormously appreciative of how Hufflepuffs herded together to block out interlopers — after Heri had expressed her dislike of the woman and Cedric mentioned that she tried to get the champions to say derogatory things about each other for the articles, Skeeter never again managed to get within twenty feet of either Hogwarts champion.

It was all exhausting, so on that day, instead of getting bothered by the Tournament and the people that insisted on badgering her (hehe, 'badgering'), Heri was focusing on something entirely different. Since Quidditch was cancelled because of the Tournament, this left her with playing mad scientist (sorcerer?) on Iolanthe. Heri had packed up the necessary equipment for her work and found herself an empty room in a disused part of the castle where she would be unlikely to be disturbed; she ended up near the hall where Sir Nick held his yearly death-day party.

Heri had wanted Io to talk since she had first planned on animating her. While her rune of animation had worked up to point, it didn't succeed in giving the doll a voice. Understandable, of course, since talking wasn't a necessary part of being alive. It had been a little disappointing, but that just gave her the opportunity to get creative with another rune cluster. In any case, Iolanthe made up for her lack of speech through her expressive behaviour.

Heri put the blue crayon down and picked up a red one.

Very much by accident had she learned a new dynamic of runes: The colours one used to draw them affected their strength, balance, and how they worked with other runes. It was something no book she had ever read before covered and she doubted they ever would. She didn't think any witch or wizard had ever tried drawing runes with anything but a wand, a quill, or ritual chalk; crayons — especially the crude kind made for children — likely didn't even exist in others' minds despite their usefulness.

That was another thing. Crayons themselves were surprisingly magical, or at least conducted magic extremely well. She didn't know if it was the wax — an excellent conduit of magic — used to make them, or the fact that they were made with the intent to be a creative outlet, but she made them a part of her rune-crafting kit when she realised that the sketch of a bind-rune she was working on for class worked better than the finished version she had made with black ink.

Heri put the red pastel down before picking up the page to hold it up to the light, making sure she had applied the colours evenly. She was using a student-quality set at the moment, but since she wasn't exactly creating a portrait to enchant, it didn't really matter in the long run. She might buy a better set in the future though.

"Io?" Heri said, glancing around the abandoned office she had found.

An answer came in the form of a clatter from the dusty bookshelf as Iolanthe popped out of an empty fish bowl and nearly fell off the shelf. A tinkling sound much like a glass bell chimed when the doll opened her mouth. She had no mechanism for vocalisation yet, but she could make some sound with the way her porcelain tongue clinked around in her porcelain mouth.
"Come here for a bit, would you, poppet?" said Heri, motioning to the table she was sitting at. "It's almost ready for you."

Iolanthe perked visibly and tinkled in excitement. With all the recklessness that came from being a chunk of Heri's magic in a physical vessel, she took a flying leap from the bookshelf, performed a double front-flip, and landed in a handstand. The little show-off.

Heri dutifully gave Iolanthe a round of applause when she gave Heri eager, expectant eyes. Curse those puppy-dog eyes. Did Heri look like that too when she was hopeful? It would be a powerful look to utilise; it could be combined with cutesy Position No. 3 to topple nations.

Heri took the slip of parchment she was working on and transfigured it into thick paper. Then she shrunk it until the seal she had created was the size of the first knuckle of Io's thumb. Finishing that, she handed the tiny scrap of paper to the eager doll.

"Now," Heri said, "put that on your tongue with the image facing down."

Iolanthe did as instructed, carefully placing the seal so that it sat in the centre of her tongue. When she was satisfied, she looked back to Heri for more instructions.

"Alright, now just hold still," said Heri, leaning forward with her wand in her hand. "This won't hurt, but I'd rather not chance burning anything accidentally."

The tip of her wand glowed bright red as Heri placed it to the faint outline still visible. The colour of wax bled through the back of the paper as it melted from the overpowered heating spell. Cautiously, Heri turned the spell from a heating charm to branding spell. The lines of melted wax and charred paper burned into the surface, the china of Iolanthe's tongue . . . scarring, for a lack of a better word.

When Heri cancelled the spelled, the paper was nothing but ash on the glistening wet wax embedded into Io's little tongue.

"One last thing . . ." she muttered, flicking her wand just so, causing a stream of freezing air to fill Iolanthe's mouth. "And we're done!"

Iolanthe cautiously prodded the tongue she still had sticking out, running her fingers over the smooth new texture of the rune on it.

"Give it a try," Heri prodded her.

Iolanthe frowned lightly.

"Is . . ." a faltering, chirpy voice came. "Is it working?"

Huge, beaming smiles alighted on both of their faces.

"It worked!" they crowed in tandem.

Another success! Heri had worried it would be another failure after how poorly the seal had done with ink; another credit for crayons! She had to add this to her family grimoire! She could put Iolanthe's entire creation outline in the book for future generations to come!

Oh, what else could she work on now? She had other things she had brought from home that she had started working on already, maybe she could make greater headway on them as well!
Heri stuffed her equipment and kit into her satchel and slung the bag of her shoulders. She plucked Iolanthe up and rushed out of the room, clutching the squealing doll to her chest.

"We have to tell Myrtle!" Heri said. "Now you two can have a proper conversation when you visit her!"

Heri’s giddiness after an experiment well done lasted well up to the day of the First Task.

Heri stood just within the entrance of the stadium. There were hundreds upon hundreds of faces staring down at her from stands that had been magicked there for the sake of the Task. At the other end of the enclosure was the Hungarian Horntail, crouched low over her clutch of eggs, her wings half-furled, her serpentine, yellow eyes upon Heri. She was a gigantic, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, leaving yard-long gouges in the hard ground. The crowd was making a great deal of noise, but whether friendly or not, Heri didn't know or care.

Heri’s hair and fringe were slicked back in a no-nonsense topknot, her usual accessories forgone lest they be destroyed. She was dressed (ironically) in an athletic outfit that had been pressed upon her which greatly resembled the traditional Hogwarts' uniform she had told her friends about on the train, but with the cassock split to allow leg movement, and underneath were black linen trousers that resembled jogging bottoms. She had never actually been able to prepare herself to face a monster before, so her exasperation at having the wear the outfit was eclipsed by her almost giddy anticipation.

Out of all the monsters Heri had faced yet, this dragon was right there next to the sixty-foot long basilisk for how monstrously large it was. It was just as deadly as well, what with the fire-breathing, claws, and spiked tail. Never in her wildest dreams had she ever imagined that she would one day face such a beast.

Despite the threat the dragon presented, Heri was actually excited. With trained dragon-tamers on hand and skilled wizards acting as judges, there wasn’t actually any risk of her being killed; they couldn't afford to have actually deadly tasks so soon in the reinstatement of the tournament since that would risk international confrontation. As such, it was very easy for Heri to regard it with the same severity as hunting the carnivorous monsters in the Forbidden Forest; dangerous, but not life-threatening.

"Miss Potter?" boomed Mr. Bagman, his voice enhanced with an Amplifying Charm. "Whenever your ready."

Jumping into action, Heri threw her hand out with a purposeful wiggle of her fingers.

Two heavy heartbeats later, something came zipping over the stands and slapped into her palm. Without thought, she wrapped the thing around her waist, and soon there was a leather belt circling her hips, not only holding her loose tabard in place, but also attached with pouches that carried the things she had thought might come in handy that day.

Kitted out, Heri looked up. She took in the sight of rocky terrain, the tall walls of the stadium made of stone and chained fencing, and the agitated chained down dragon snarling and flicking its wings. She smiled grimly and left the safety of the trees.

Striding out into the open, Heri pointed her wand at the ground and drew precise symbols, muttering a spell under her breath. She had only done this spell a few times before with moderate results, but she was hoping that with the increase in dust and dirt around . . .
Yes!

In five whirlwinds in front of her, gravel and sand from the stadium ground swirled up, compacted, and turned into five extra Heri Potters, identical in features if extremely washed out in colouring.

Tch, they were supposed to be fully coloured. Looks like quantity negated quality. She would need to work more at it.

"Now, here's something new!" Mr. Bagman cried. "I don't think I've seen this spell before!"

Heri ignored the commentary. Until the end of this Task, nothing outside of the rocky battlegrounds existed.

"Wait for my signal," she told the debris clones, leading them closer to the dragon.

The dragon looked enraged to see that the number of intruders in her territory had increased. She snorted a gout of flames and growled in warning as Heri and her doppelgängers got within shouting distance.

§Threat!§ it snarled in the language that all reptiles used. §ANGER. Foul egg-thieves. Must defend. MY eggs! Burning fire. Rip apart!§

Heri stopped and raised her hands in a placating manner.

§I don't intend to steal your eggs!§ Heri called up to the irate beast, absently registering a chorus of gasps and exclamations all around her. ("She's talking to it!" boomed out.)

The dragon reared back for a moment before giving an enraged roar.

§MY EGGS. PROTECT MY EGGS!§

§Please, there is an extra egg in your nest,§ Heri told her, pointing at the golden egg visible from under the Horntail's girth. §It's not yours! It was planted there! I can remove it for you!§

§Must defend. Thieves want my eggs. I will burn! Fire scorches!§

§Please, it will hatch and destroy your eggs! Let me help you!§

§You will not touch my eggs!§ the Horntail hissed, thrashing the ground with its tail again.

Heri huffed. This was going nowhere! The dragon gave no sign that she comprehended what Heri was trying to tell her at all! Heri decided to pull back, keeping her eyes on the angry reptile.

"Alright, ladies!" Heri called to her constructs when she was back a few more yards. She lifted her free hand in a 'wait' sign as all six of them shifted into running stances. "Evasive manoeuvring; split up and distract it! Ready?"

They tensed for action.

"Scatter!"

Heri bolted behind the nearest boulder when the Horntail spat a gout of flames at the charging doppelgängers. Since they were made of wind and sediment, they were nearly as fast as nymphs and easily evaded destruction. The constructs weaved in and out of range, climbed on rock clusters, scrambled on the chain fencing, and bellowed at the top of their lungs, doing everything they could
think of to confuse the dragon while Heri crept along the edge of the enclosure.

The Horntail roared in agitation.

Heri darted from behind a pile of rubble and took cover beside an uprooted tree when the dragon side-swiped a construct that got too close, taking out a chunk of its middle and sending it staggering back.

With a look of surprise on its face, the doppelgänger crumbled back into debris, creating a temporary cloud of dust that the others used as cover.

Heri cursed and rolled out of sight as the dragon lashed out at one of the remaining doppelgängers that was dashing not far from where she was hiding.

It would have been so much easier if she could cast a shield charm or something, but that was presently out of the question. The creation of the dust constructs was maintained magic, and she couldn't cast anything else until she cancelled the spell or they were all destroyed. As they were doing a pretty good job of distracting the dragon, Heri was hoping to snatch the golden egg up while the dragon wasn't looking.

That plan looked iffy at best when the dragon took out two more doppelgängers with a blast of fire and a swipe of her claws.

The two remainders quickly decided that a new plan was in order when the dragon spotted Heri before she could take cover once more. One caught her up in a fireman hold and made a break for it as the other jumped between them and the dragon, sacrificing itself to the flames.

"Alright, Plan A and B were a bust," Heri breathed, crouching near the trees again. "Time for Plan C."

Heri stuck her wand through the base of her topknot and reached for a pouch she had attached to the right side of her belt. She pulled out the Horntail simulacrum that she had gotten from Bagman. She then shifted her hold on the animated figurine and reached back in the bag for the other thing she needed.

When Heri's hand latched on to what she was looking for, she gave a pleased sound and pulled that out as well. It was Ignis, the dragon statuette that Hagrid had given her for her twelfth birthday. It had gone through the trials of Heri's experimentation as most of her belongings had, and was now capable of flight on top of being fully articulated in the same manner as Iolanthe. It was not autonomous like Iolanthe, but it was easily directed.

Heri cancelled the spell for the dust doppelgängers. She tossed the two figurines on the ground before turning her wand on them in turn with Engorgement Charms. Ignis was made the size of a horse and the Horntail figurine grew to the size of an Asiatic elephant.

"Dirigo!" she casted upon the simulacrum, binding it to function under her control.

The elephantine dragon figure stood at attention, awaiting instruction, the golden medallion declaring Heri as the fourth champion to face her dragon still dangling at its neck.

Heri climbed onto the back of Ignis and settled herself into the groove of its spine that was meant for its wings. Ignis came to life (figuratively) when Heri pressed her hand against a sigil at the base of its skull with precise intent. She gripped it there firmly, securing her hold. It cantered in place much like a jittery horse and tossed its head.
"Irritate her into leaving her nest," Heri told the miniature Horntail.

The simulacrum did as it was told, emerging out from where they had been hidden with a roar of unmistakable challenge, startling both the crowd and the mother dragon. Heri and Ignis soon followed, but shot up into the sky instead of attacking directly; it wouldn't do to drive the Horntail into a complete frenzy.

One thing Heri had learned during her research was that dragons were extremely territorial. In the wild, this wasn't so much of a problem, but reserve-bred dragons started attacking each other as soon as they were hatched. Such fights were vicious, responsible for the majority of injuries that dragon-tamers suffered. It should go without saying that as soon as the Horntail saw the enlarged figurine and heard its challenge, she wanted nothing more than to rip it apart.

Heri and Ignis were saved from the aggression by flying out of range. They circled overhead like a bird of prey, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

The simulacrum (Heri absent-mindedly named it Ptolemy) made a nuisance of itself by diving and darting in and just out of striking distance. The Horntail's head followed it around, her neck stretching and slithering like a serpent. Unfortunately, she didn't want to take off, putting more importance on her eggs than her need to eliminate competition. Though she writhed and twisted, furling and unfurling her wings and keeping those fearsome yellow eyes on her target, she was too wary to move away from her eggs.

Heri chose then to bodyslam the back of the Horntail's head, making the creature jerk in surprise and diverting a blast of fire that narrowly missed Ptolemy. The Horntail roared in outrage and whipped her tail up, but Heri and Ignis were already swerving away, looping around to back-up the simulacrum.

"Go for the eggs!" she called to Ptolemy, rushing at the Horntail's face with a spell aimed at her eyes.

The Horntail had to jerk her head out of the way of Heri's spell, but she didn't miss Ptolemy swooping too close for comfort near her clutch. Snarling, she nailed Ptolemy in the chest with her claws, causing the simulacrum to go weaving backwards like a drunken housefly.

It appeared that such an attack toward her eggs was the last straw for the Horntail. At last, she reared, spreading her great, black, leathery wings at last, and launched herself at her smaller counterpart.

"Díkaios avástachti píesi!" Heri cried, swinging her wand forward as if it was sword.

The Horntail actually jerked a bit as Heri's spell came to bear. It was a spell one of the older witch-turned-dryads had taught her, called the Burden of Atlas. It was a combination of increased air pressure and gravity that made the area surrounding the target bear down, pressing them into the ground with weight that was just a step away from crushing them into paste. It wasn't anywhere near strong enough to push a magically resistant creature like the dragon into the ground and leave her unable to move like it would with any other sort of creature, but it did slow her down a great deal.

Taking advantage of the situation, another spell fell from Heri's lips, her wand pointed in the direction of the eggs.

Unfortunately, Heri's Burden of Atlas didn't stop the Horntail from breathing fire. She let loose a gout that burned blue with her ire, catching Ptolemy on its legs. One leg burned to char and the other melted right off. As Ptolemy wasn't a living thing, the scorching didn't hinder its flying at all, but the
nature of its animating charm had it yowling as if it was in actual pain.

§OVER HERE!§ Heri yelled, leading Ignis in charging the dragon once more.

The distraction she provided granted enough time for Ptolemy to retreat, taking refuge higher up in the sky. The pressure-inducing spell was wearing off due to the magically-resistant nature of dragon hide, but the Horntail was still slow enough that Heri managed to nail it in the eye with her slingshot.

The dragon hissed belligerently and lashed out with a claw, but Heri and Ignis were already speeding away.

It was then that the Horntail noticed Heri's and Ignis' proximity to her nest. With a vicious snarl that actually made the stadium echo, the dragon broke free of the spell and hurled after them.

"Eat this!" Heri shouted, landing another hit in the dragon's face.

The pain from the eye-irritating solution Heri had soaked her ammunition in wasn't enough to stop the Horntail, but it bought Heri a precious few seconds while the dragon thrashed blindly. That was all Heri needed.

Ignis dived. Before the dragon could reorient herself, they were speeding toward the ground as fast as they could go, toward the unprotected eggs. Heri leaned over the side of Ignis — her arm stretched out —

And in a huge spurt of speed and light, they were off, rocketing up to where Ptolemy was waiting, far out of the Horntail's reach. Clinging to Heri's back was the doppelgänger she had created while the Horntail had been distracted, the golden egg pressed safely into its stomach.

When it was safe, Heri tucked the egg under one arm and dismissed the doppelgänger.

Allowing herself a calming breath, Heri watched as the dragon-tamers swarmed into the stadium. When the Horntail was properly subdued, she led her simulacrums back down.

It was as if somebody had just turned the volume back up — for the first time, she became properly aware of the noise of the crowd, screaming and applauding as loudly as the Irish supporters at the World Cup.

"Look at that!" Mr. Bagman was yelling. "Will you look at that! Our youngest champion not only put on a spectacular showing, she isn't injured at all! Well, this is going to shorten the odds on Miss Potter!"

So caught up by the spectacle of Heri's showing, Mr. Bagman made no mention of the burst of bright light that had lit over Heri's head when she hauled up her double. Many in the crowd thought the light had been caused by some spell Heri had cast and thought nothing more of it. Only a select few understood the meaning of the incandescent image haloing the head of one who had just proved herself in battle.

It was after the post-Task party in Hufflepuff that Zacharias and Ernie covertly led Heri aside. The others were already in the midst of their pre-slumber rituals even though it was still a good two hours before curfew, so it was very simple for the three of them to slip off.

Ernie wasn't sure how to feel about things. On one hand, it was always wonderful to discover a new godborn; there was an innate camaraderie between those of divine descent, an inborn sense of
connection that came from being the offspring of the forces of nature and the manifestations of the aspects of humanity. On the other hand, it was incredibly jarring when a proper one — one with an actual divine parent — popped up, since Magical Britain's godborn population was small and derived mainly from ancestry. Amongst them, Ernie himself was considered a rarity, what with him being a first generation legacy. In hindsight, it was pretty obvious to those that knew the signs that Heri was a godborn, but new ones were rare enough that it took them all by surprise.

Not that they had told her yet, of course. It wouldn't do to go blurtling it out where her potential freak-out could draw unwanted attention. It was an open secret amongst wizards that the gods fraternised amongst them, but the resulting offspring and families liked to keep themselves lowkey and within their own little social circle. As such, Ernie and Zacharias felt duty-bound to bring Heri to the gathering that had been agreed upon before they informed her of what she was.

Well, *Ernie* felt duty-bound — Zacharias was caught up somewhere between irritated that another person shared the trait that made him special, and smug that it was *his* friend that was a newly discovered godborn.

"Where *are* we going?" asked Heri, looking back to the hall of tapestries they had just talked through. "What's so important that we need to go to the other side of the school to discuss it?"

"Others will be meeting us there. It'll be easier to explain then," Ernie replied vaguely.

The usual rendezvous spot was up in the north bell tower, not too out of the way from the usual routes to lessons, but far enough that it wasn't anywhere a regular student would wander up to. Meetings weren't a regular thing; usually they just gathered at the beginning of the school-year to take note of what godbornss if any had started that year, but times came that a previously unknown was discovered, and, of course, they had to be introduced and informed. The formerly newest godborn was currently a second-year Gryffindor, but she had moved to Britain only two years ago, so she was more an *Indian* godborn than a British one.

When the three of them finally made it to the bell tower, everyone else had already arrived, all waiting expectantly. Zacharias ushered Heri in first while Ernie checked to make sure no one had followed them — then he closed the heavy wooden door.

There was currently fifteen of them in Hogwarts, including Heri. Two had graduated the year before — the frightening Marcus Flint was a thirteenth generation legacy of Mars, and Head Girl Penelope Clearwater was a second generation legacy of Concordia — while the others that were known and of school age weren't capable enough to attend Hogwarts. They were expecting a handful more in the coming years, but their number had never exceeded thirty at any time. A good half of them were Greco-Romantic (as to be expected), but nearly every pantheon had been represented over time, this year's bunch having representatives of African and Asian pantheons.

"So-oo..." said Heri grasping her hands behind her. "What's going on?"

There was a moment of silence wherein those in the know look at each other. They hadn't decided yet who would inform Heri about the truth of her birth. None of them really wanted to be the one to tell their orphaned tyrant-vanquisher that her mother who had been all but sainted wasn't as faithful as she had thought.

"You're dad isn't really James Potter but a god or goddess. That makes you a godborn like the rest of us here."

Eyes flew to Zarcharias, standing just off to the side of where Heri was standing, hands in his pockets, and scowling at the wall. He shrugged as everyone else gaped.
"Just thought you should know," he said, looking over at Heri.

Heri's face was slack. She quickly blinked twice.

"Excuse me?"

"We know it's hard to believe," Ernie chimed in, giving Zacharias a hard look. "But it's true! I'm a legacy of Clio, Muse of History, and Zach's the son of Pheme, goddess of fame and notoriety. Our families have been interacting with the Gods for ages! We all know the signs, and there isn't a doubt that you're one of us!"

Ernie pushed Eddie Carmichael, a fifth-year Ravenclaw, to the forefront.

"Carmichael's family descends from Oghma," he chattered on, "a Celtic god of communication and writing, so he's the expert on godborn spotting! Go on, Carmichael, tell her who you think her father is!"

Carmichael floundered at being put on the spot in front of a still not reacting Heri Potter, but he did as he did best and started spewing out facts.

"Right! From the traits I've observed, especially the-the war hammer we saw during the First Task — w-well, it might have been a club or, um, a pernach or something — I-I didn't really get a good look at it — but I, um, I've narrowed it down to gods of battle. There's Thor, of course — his symbol's a hammer — he's a Norse god of war and storms; there's Belatucadros, a Gaulish war god; Agrona, a Proto-Celtic goddess of war and strife; Haphaestus or Vulcan, again because of the hammer; Hercules, the Greco-Romantic god of heroes — his symbol's a club; Aeron, a Celtic god of battle and slaughter; erm, basically any of the Egyptian deities; the Morrígan, an Irish triple goddess of prophecy and death on the battlefield; Durga, the Hindu goddess of—"

"My mother would have told me if I had an older sister," cut in the former newest addition, Nandini Johar. (She reminded Heri a bit of the Patil twins, but with stronger features.) She crossed her arms and gave a pointed look. "Your panicking is doing nothing to assure her."

It was then that the door opened again. Coming through the door Ernie was certain he had bolted, Luna Lovegood made her ditsy way in, humming and bouncing as if she was frolicking through a field of flowers.

"Luna?" said Heri, expression finally returning to her face.

"Hello, Heri. Congratulations for being claimed. I've never seen such a beautiful mace before. Your father must be very picky when having children."

"It was a hammer, Lovegood," said Zarcharias, a bored look on his face.

"Most likely a war hammer," Carmichael corrected. "As I said, we were a bit too far away. It could've been a battle axe as well."

Heri gave them doubtful looks before turning back to Lovegood.

"You're, erm, you are a . . . a godborn as well, Luna?" She sounded still unconvinced.

"I suppose that's a word for it," Lovegood replied, twirling a strand of hair. "Gran-gran is one of the Morai, the Mother of their Maiden-Mother-Crone. I'm not sure if they're true goddesses or personifications. Gran-gran's the allotter of the threads, Lachesis."
"So . . . Did you see me coming?"

Lovegood hummed.

"I didn't actually. Your lines of Fate are nearly impossible to follow. Always doubling back or changing altogether. Have you been initiated into the Order of the Oddfish yet?"

There was a loud groan. Another second-year Gryffindor girl, Romilda Vane, moved forward, her hands on her hips. She was a third generation legacy of Bia, minor goddess/personification of forcefulness.

"For the last time, Lovegood!" the curly-haired brunette snapped. "We're not calling ourselves that! It's absurd and has nothing to do with what we are!"

"I'll thank you to not use such a tone when talking to one of my friends," Heri said in response, her lips flattening into a straight line.

Ernie and Zacharias winced at her stringent tone. Heri was only ever this formally-worded when she was ready to smack a bitch.

"If you can't maintain a civil tongue while in a public forum, it's best to keep your ill-tempered mouth shut."

Heri stared the younger girl down until she bowed her head, cowed.

"Now." Heri crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "Jokes aside, what's this about my father not being my real father? Not only is that insulting beyond words, it isn't true."

"Heri—" Ernie tried again.

"Ernie." Her tone was adamant. "The genealogy tapestry at my godfather's house declares me the flesh and blood child of both Lily and James Potter. No doubt you already know that if any sort of magic would be a fool-proof judge of familial relation, it would be Black family magic."

"Wha—?" Ernie gaped. "But . . . You're a godborn! There's no doubt about it!"

"Well, yes, I am, but I don't know why being a godborn means my parents aren't my parents."

Suffice to say that the rest of the meeting didn't go anywhere near how Ernie excepted it to go. In the end, the already aware Heri was introduced to the rest of the semi-divine without anyone of the gravity of circumstance Ernie had been expecting. None of them could figure out how Heri managed to have two fully mortal parents, and not only that, but they were no closer to figuring out who her divine parent was than they were at the start. As Carmichael kept insisting, they had been too far away from Heri to get a proper look at the hammer-like image, so all they knew was that her parent was related to battle in some way.

Possibly.

Maybe.

The weeks after the First Task were marked with the increase of Heri's popularity amongst her peers.

Yet again.
No one had believed that she had cheated to enter the Tournament (not really — those that claimed to do so did so only for the sake of being nasty), she was a Hufflepuff after all, but there was a grudging exasperation that had been directed at her for her ‘bloody amazing luck’ that granted her the things everyone else wanted so badly. Those ruffled feathers had been soothed back down when those that griped about Heri’s ‘good fortune’ realised that there was absolutely nothing lucky about having to face a fire-breathing monster big enough to wrestle with the giant squid from the Black Lake.

Adulation pouring in again, Heri decided that the announcement of the Yule Ball couldn’t have come at a worse time.

A ball. A ball she was contractually obligated to attend, and accompanied with a partner to boot. She had been looking forward to a winter holiday that she could finally spend at a home with people that loved her, but instead she had to stick around to got to a sodding school dance. It was only how used she was to reigning in her temper that kept her from screaming in outrage when Professor Sprout informed her.

With the Ball on their brains, it seemed to be the only thing anyone ever talked about now. Forget classes, it was all about dates and outfits. Being someone who worked her arse off for her top marks (though no one knew it), it grated on Heri’s nerves that the bit of studying and tutoring she did was being blown off for such a trivial matter. She was no Hermione Granger, but if someone pestered her when she was trying to read one more time . . .

Heri had never known so many people to put their names down to stay at Hogwarts for the winter holiday; she always did before, of course, because the alternative was going back to Privet Drive, but she had always been very much in the minority before. This year, however, everyone in fourth year and above seemed to be staying, and they all were obsessed with the coming ball. While the girls were far more obvious about it — giggling and whispering in the corridors; shrieking with laughter as boys passed them; excitedly comparing notes on what they were going to wear — the boys were just as preoccupied — Heri did not miss the way their eyes lingered longer than usual on their female counterparts, calculating their chances.

During all this hoopla, fanboys had been trying their luck with her as well.

In the time when Marcus was still attending Hogwarts, no groupie dared to approach her in such a way, fearing his rebuttal. He had never expressed any sort of returning romantic interest in her (much to her dissatisfaction), but it was generally accepted that in the same way Marcus' friends were 'his boys', Heri was 'his girl'. By the rules of the animal kingdom, one did not approach another group's females unless they wanted to fight for them, and it was well known that Marcus Flint would wipe the floor with someone so thoroughly that the stone would be polished red with their guts. Now that Marcus was out of the picture, they'd started slavering like it was open season.

Lucian and Graham kept the baying hounds at a distance when she met up with them and their friends, but they just didn't have the same intimidating presence like Marcus — it must’ve had something to do with being a legacy of a war god. The former Slytherin had a fear-inspiring presence that kept people from even calling out to Heri when she was around him. Even though the Slytherin Quidditch team was all sorts of growly and forbidding, Heri’s admirers were regrowing enough of their backbones to brave the proverbial dragon's castle to reach the princess.

It was not that Heri was intimidated by their attentions, of course, it was just . . . she felt awful for the fact that if one of them ever managed to get through her crowd's barricade to reach her and actually ask her to the ball, she wouldn't have the heart to let them down by saying no. All that effort and courage only to get shot down? She wouldn't be able to handle the guilt. This lead to the next
fact that if she ever said yes to \textit{any} of them, she'd then inevitably have to say no to the \textit{rest} of them. The lose-lose reality of the situation made her curse whoever it was that started the tradition of a Yule Ball.

On that day, Heri was blessed with an afternoon free of hangers-on, so she was taking advantage of the situation to enjoy some time outside. Megan, Hannah, and Sally-Anne were caught up in their Muggle Studies assignment, but her usual three boys were with her, as were Luna and Ginny, so maybe they could play a game of three-on-three Quidditch or something. There had been a light snowfall the night before, so they could have a snowball fight as well.

As Heri was daydreaming about the fun to be had, they neared the entrance to the open-windowed walkway that led into the main courtyard. There, bunched beside a pillar, was a trio of Durmstrang boys being surrounded by a gaggle of chattering girls, girls Heri knew very well to be Quidditch groupies. It was little surprise to note that Viktor Krum was one of those boys.

Heri saw the suppressed look of misery on Krum's face and winced in sympathy. The fangirls had somehow managed to circle around him and his friends, trapping them with no means of escape without them getting physical. She couldn't help but feel sorry for him — she had been in similar situations before her friends learned how to act as bodyguards.

"Poor buggers," Zacharias muttered, also noticing the troubled trio as the six of them got closer.

"What's so poor about them?" asked Ernie, a sceptical look on his face. "Surrounded by good-looking girls that would jump at the chance to date them; it's bloody lucky if you ask me."

"Well . . ." Wayne hedged, giving the mixed crowd a dubious look. "The girls aren't \textit{really} interested in them, right? It's 'cause Krum's famous and all."

"I don't need you backing me up, Hopkins," Zacharias grimaced. He desisted when Heri gave him a look as she gave Wayne a hug when he looked down dejectedly. "Whatever. Hopkins is right — those slags are just starstruck 'cause Krum's a celebrity, and being hounded by status-hungry groupies is never fun."

"And how would \textit{you} know they only like him because he's famous?" Ginny retorted, cheeks a bit pink as she crossed her arms. She seemed to be taking his words personally.

The corner of Zacharias' lips quirked up in a reluctant smirk of amusement. As if the son of a goddess of fame and notoriety wouldn't know such thing.

Those in the know shared a look.

"Trust me," Zacharias said, snorting. "I \textit{know}."

They got to the walkway and began climbing over the low wall of the opened windows to get to the snow-covered lawn.

Heri was in the middle of swinging her legs over when she felt a tug at her sleeve. She looked over to see Luna holding up a red cloth with intricate decoration at the edges.

"That boy over there must have dropped it," Luna said, pointing at the huddled Durmstrang lads.

As Luna had said, Heri could see that one of the Durmstrang boys was missing the cloth the others had tied around the head of their staves. The staff looked rather naked without it, but none of the boys had realised it was missing yet because of how distracted they were.
"Oh," Heri said, taking the decorated cloth. "We should go return it to him. It looks like it's a part of his uniform."

"Are you two coming?" Zacharias called, an irritated expression on his face.

The other four were already climbing on their brooms and tossing around snow.

"Just a moment!" Heri called back. She turned to Luna, "Come with me?"

"It's better if I don't," Luna replied, dropping herself down on the white ground. "My presence would excite the Grutenhogs that feed off of them and hinder your efforts in helping. Oh, but you should know that Cho Chang has been flirting with Cedric Diggory lately, and she plans on getting him to ask her to the Yule Ball later this afternoon."

"Erm, why do I need to know that?" asked Heri, not understanding her friend's train of thought.

"It'll help," was all Luna said. She then turned and ambled off toward Ginny.

Shaking her head, Heri started toward the captured Durmstrang boys.

In his years of being friends with Viktor Krum, Ivan Volkov had witnessed many instances of fans trying to get at Viktor. Even before his international stardom borne from his Quidditch career, Viktor drew in admirers with his charmingly awkward mannerisms, and all of those followers tried their hand at getting his attention. From thrown lingerie and forceful sex-appeal to painted faces and over-enthusiasm, Ivan had been certain that he had seen everything there was to see from starstruck fans. Even with the unusual persistence of the Hogwarts girls, their hounding wasn't anything new.

What was a bit different was the fact that the Hogwarts fangirls had managed to corner not just Viktor, but Ivan and their other friend, Martin Helstrøm, as well. None of them were what anyone would call small men, all of them participating in the school-sanctioned hand-to-hand combat lessons, but the gaggle of giggling girls had somehow manoeuvred them into a position where they had no option of escape unless they wanted to punch a girl out of the way.

Ivan had heard tales about Hogwarts having an academic House that encouraged cunning and craftiness, but he hadn't expected to be taken in so easily.

Ivan drew in a fortifying breath at the reality of their capture when —

"Excuse me if you please."

— a voice rang out over the jabbering of the girls pawing at them.

Standing beyond the girls circling them, a bit to the side of the pillar they had been herded against, was yet another girl, a little thing that looked like a good wind would knock her over. She looked vaguely familiar, but the only thing that mattered to Ivan at the moment was that she didn't look fanatical like the rest did. In fact, in the face of how she drew the attention away from Viktor who was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, Ivan could argue that she looked like one of God's own angels coming to their rescue.

A chorus of excited greetings rang out. A handful of the girls at the back of the huddle surrounding the troubled four abandoned their positions to crowd around the new girl instead.

The girl bobbed in a small curtsy, prompting the others to return the gesture.
"Oh! Heri!" the lead fangirl cried, detaching her claws from Viktor's arm. Wonders upon wonders, she actually stepped away from the Quidditch star and approached this 'Heri'. Curiously enough, the starstruck expression on her face didn't go away. "How are you? It's so rare to see you alone!"

"What are you doing here?" asked another fangirl, talking quickly. She actually nudged the first one out of the way. "Lavender told me that Parvati told her that Leanne said that you lot would be working on the Charms project until dinner!"

The Heri girl smiled disarmingly.

"Yes, we were, but we finished a lot earlier than we expected, so we figured some fresh air would do us good."

"Are you going to play Quidditch then?" fangirl No. 1 asked, shoving No. 2 back.

"We might," the Heri girl replied amicably. "We don't have any equipment, but we could charm some snowballs to act as Bludgers. Of course, I'll have to convince Zacharias that it was his idea or else he'll gripe about it for the rest of the day if his team loses."

There was a round of giggling.

"Anyway," the Heri girl said, "Sorry to bother you lot—"

"You could never be a bother, Heri!" a girl called out to vehement agreement.

The Heri girl smiled indulgently.

"You're too sweet. Still, I found this cloth a moment ago and I figured this gentleman over here would want it back." She gave another little curtsy as she addressed the three of them.

In Miss Heri's hand was one of the sashes that all Durmstrang students were required to tie around their staves, being the distinguishing mark of what year a student was in. The entire delegation that came to Hogwarts were seventh-year students, and so all of them were adorned with red. A quick check of their staves revealed that it was Martin that had lost his sash.

Martin retrieved his sash from the girl with an awkward mutter of gratitude. He spoke the least amount of English among them and it made him shy.

"You're welcome," Miss Heri said, blinking up at Martin sweetly. She turned back to the fangirls. "Well, I better go before Ern— Oh!"

She stood up straighter as comprehension adorned her face.

"I just remembered! Cho Chang intends to convince Cedric to ask her to the Ball!"

"What!" squawked fangirl No. 1 and 2 at the same time.

The other girls murmured unhappily amongst themselves.

Miss Heri nodded earnestly.

"I was told she's been scoping him out lately. She plans to make her move this afternoon!"

"Not on my watch she won't," growled the one that had been clinging to Viktor like a limpet. "Where is she?"
"I would assume the Charms Courtyard since that's where Cedric and his friends usually hang out."

Impossibly, the herd of shrieking harpies vacated the premises immediately, apparently Hell-bent on preventing the injustice that was the Chang girl securing Diggory as a date. They didn't even look back.

Miss Potter stood quietly with them as they watched on in relieved disbelief as their tormentors left them behind. She watched the crowd go with a mild, vaguely interested look on her face.

When the fangirls were gone, Miss Heri turned back to them with what was unmistakably a knowing smirk on her face. She tilted her head in amused acknowledgement and turned to go.

"You're welcome."

For the first time since the announcement of the Yule Ball, Ivan felt an inkling of interest instead of dread. Judging by the wondering look on Viktor's face, he wasn't alone in his fascination.

Later that evening, Heri would be told from a swoony Myrtle about what Cedric Diggory was getting up to in the prefects' bathroom. While initially appalled that Myrtle spying on people in the bath and wanted to tell Heri the details, Heri would grudgingly admit that such a perversion was to her benefit on that occasion. Instead of whatever X-rated shenanigans Myrtle had been hoping for, Cedric had taken the Golden Egg in the water with him and discovered that the Second Task would involve the merfolk in the Black Lake.

"It's not decent, Myrtle!" Heri admonished still, cheeks stained red.

Myrtle only giggled lewdly, a dreamy look on her face.

Heri decided that she would not be telling Cedric how she came across the knowledge of the Second Task. In fact, she would be taking this secret to the grave.

In the following week, there was a noticeable increase of interest from the Durmstrang boys when it came to Hogwarts girls. Well, one girl in particular. However, try as they might, they never again encountered the strange girl that had saved Viktor Krum from adoring admirers. In the most maddening turn of events, they would occasionally catch a glimpse of her at a distance, but she would invariably disappear again. One lucky fellow had been in earshot of her, hearing her talking with some friends, but when he turned the corner of the corridor they entered just before he reached them, they were gone.

In short, it was bewildering and exasperating.

Unaware of the manhunt out for her, Heri spent her time not in classes either in the common room or in Myrtle's loo. She took care to use the secret passageways Fred and George had shown her as well as the Marauder's Map to avoid run-ins. She found the lack of contact with the rest of the student body to be a good way to avoid the fanboys that were sniffing at her skirts.

As Yule drew nearer, the weather turned even chillier. Snow was falling thickly upon the castle and its grounds now. The pale blue Beauxbatons carriage looked like a large, frosted pumpkin next to the iced gingerbread house that was Hagrid's cabin, while the Durmstrang ship's portholes were glazed with ice, the rigging white with frost. The house-elves down in the kitchen were outdoing themselves with a series of rich, warming stews and savoury puddings, and only that Delacour chit
seemed to be able to find anything to complain about.

"It eez too 'eavy, all zis 'Ogwarts food," she was heard saying grumpily one evening. "I will not fit into my dress-robes!"

"Oooh, there's a tragedy!" Hannah had snapped as Delacour trounced off with her flock of uppity birds in tow. "She really thinks a lot of herself, that one, doesn't she?"

On that day, Heri was holding court in the Transfiguration Courtyard. Officially, it was an inter-House, cross-year study session that she had been leading since her first year, but there was no denying that the other students approached her in supplication for whatever it was that they wanted from her, from help with their assignments to personal advice. Most of the older years were too prideful to ask for help from their juniors, but Heri received obeisance from the first-years up to a handful of fifth-years.

Heri was currently perched on a branch of a low-hanging weeping willow with other outdoorsy types hanging in the tree with her. The tree was set in the middle of a circle of wooden benches filled with students that needed further instruction on Transfiguration. They had been in the middle of a demonstration when the sound of a trumpet rang out.

All over the courtyard students stopped what they were doing and turned toward the out-of-place sound.

Luna stood in front of what looked like a quarter of the delegation from Durmstrang. Pressed to her lips was actually a bugle, and when the attention shifted to her, she played another quick riff before lowering the instrument and gesturing grandly behind her and the stone-faced foreign boys.

"At the leisure of Her Most Eminent and Serene Highness, the frabjous Princess Who Lived," Luna announced gravely, causing laughter and eye-rolls, "I present the young men of Durmstrang to petition the companionship of a particular maiden. What say you, courtiers?"

The students snickered and catcalled, excited for a scene. All of them had noted that Viktor Krum was amongst the group.

Luna bowed grandly in Heri's direction.

"By your leave, what say you, Your Highness?"

Half hidden in the shade of the tree, it was easy for Heri to cover her grin. Leave it to Luna to liven up the occasion with absurdity. She leaned over to Megan and whispered in her ear. If they were going to follow through with this game, they might as well play it up.

Megan stepped down from table at Heri's knees she had been sitting at and sauntered forward a few steps, her nose raised imperiously. She fell out of character to giggle before raising her nose again and putting her hands on her hips.

In her loud voice, Megan said, "M'lady is of a good humour and gives leave for these petitioners to proceed."

A tall, burly young man stepped forward. Heri recognised him as one of the boys she had saved from the Quidditch. It was obvious to her that he was uncertain if the played up formality was in earnest or not, but he compromised with a semi-formal bow. As he straightened, he scanned the crowd.

"My name is Ivan Volkov," the young man began, "Last veek, ve met a charming young lady in
the corridors. Ve did not haff much time to talk to her as she was expected else-ware, but ve would like the chance to talk to her again. Ve haff looked, but she keeps disappearing."

"And why do— erm, why dost thou—?"

Zacharias kicked at Megan's heel, cutting her off and making her yelp.

"English is his second language," Zacharias said, giving Megan a condescending look. "Don't be rude by using an out-dated form he wouldn't be familiar with."

Megan scowled.

"You're one to talk about being rude! Way to ruin the game, Smith!" She turned back to Volkov and crossed her arms with a huff. "Sorry. So you want our help or something?"

The older boy nodded slowly.

"Miss Lovegood said she would be here today."

As the surrounding students looked around at each other for a clue of who it was the Durmstrang boys were looking for, Heri only cocked her head to the side. One of her lambs had caught the collective attention of the Durmstrang students? This was causing even more excitement than earlier that week when a couple of girls came squealing about being asked to the ball by some of them.

"Well, where is she?" asked Megan expectantly.

The young men almost fidgeted, glancing about.

Volkov turned to Luna who was sat on the grass, making a daisy chain.

"Ve do not see her, Miss Lovegood," he said.

"She will need that encouragement I mentioned," Luna replied, not looking up from her flowers.

At that, Krum was pushed forward to stand beside Volkov, looking as grim as a plague doctor. Having seen this expression on the surly young man many times before, Heri concluded this was his ill-at-ease expression.

Volkov pat Krum companionably on the shoulder.

"Viktor is the one who is required to bring a partner to the ball, so he will be doing the asking."

Looking like he was walking to the guillotine, Krum rubbed the knuckles of one hand. Taking a breath, he dropped to one knee and lifted a fist. On the exhale, he drove the first into the ground, impacting the earth with a loud BANG, and creating a crater as large as if a Bludger had landed.

Gasps and exclamations sounded, the Hogwarts students flabbergasted at the display.

Krum stood once more and removed a ring from his finger.

"I was told that a show of strength would be better than flowers," Krum said, his voice low and rumbling. He scanned the gaping crowd for the face he was looking for. "Miss Lovegood suggested something literally earth-shattering. Will you now attend the ball with me, Miss Heri?"

There was a beat of shocked silence.
Viktor was wondering what the Hell he was doing. They had been searching for that unusual girl for so long that he had forgotten that he didn't actually know anything about her beyond the fact that she seemed to be pleasant and clever, and didn't care about his fame. Such traits were important of course, but he now felt they were weak reasons to put himself out in such a way. She hung around the crowd that pawed at the Girl Who Lived — that wasn't exactly a recommendation for her character.

He was ready to call it off and run off to ask that bookish girl from the library when he heard the giggling. It wasn't the simpering noise he was used to dreading though, but a sound of genuine if girlish amusement.

Out from the tree that the female Hogwarts champion was enthroned in came the girl they had been looking for, Heri. Cheeks lightly flushed, she was covering her giggles with one hand as she tilted her head at him in acknowledgement.

Viktor breathed a sigh of relief and would have stepped forward if it wasn't for the Lovegood girl bouncing up to Heri and placing a flower crown on her head.

"Your Highness," Lovegood said, giving an exaggerated curtsy.

Heri snorted softly and batted at the other girl's shoulder.

"Really, Luna," she said. "All this fuss when you could have just told me they were asking about me! I don't think Kurm is one for public displays, you know."

That was when it hit Viktor, why she had looked so familiar: It was because he had seen her before the night of the Champion Selection and at the First Task. Heri was Heri Potter.

He groaned and face-palmed. Honestly, how had he missed that? How had any of them missed that? It wasn't as if she was wearing a disguise!

Well, to be fair, she was currently far from the hard-faced Amazonian he had seen before, what with a gentle smile, fluttery fringe hiding her scar, and a warm atmosphere around her. It was boggling to realise that this was the girl that went head-to-head against government officials and dive-bombed a dragon.

He peered at her through the gap of his fingers.

"I did not know you vere Heri Potter."

A look of surprise lit her face, then a bright, pleased look.

"You're funny," she laughed, taking another step toward him. "I don't think I've ever met a person that was interested in 'just Heri'."

When she was in arm reach of him, she held her hand out to him. Without thinking, Viktor caught the hand and kissed the air over it, feeling his cheeks heat when the catcalls started up again.

"No one's gone through so much effort to impress me before either," Heri said, peering up at him with half-lidded eyes and playful tilt of her lips. Despite himself, he felt his breath catch and his heart-rate pick up. "And I was very impressed by the crater you made. I accept your invitation."

Feeling victorious despite his awkwardness, Viktor grinned. His smile became a smirk when he noted that the young men of Hogwarts that were around looked none too pleased with him, some glaring outright.
Let them be jealous, he thought to himself. They weren't the ones that sent out search-parties to find her on only a description of her looks and a name. They weren't the ones that had to figure out how to reach the standard required to convince her that her own friend acknowledged to be lofty. Hell, they didn't even have the stones to ask her themselves even though they had ample opportunity to do so as people she was familiar with. If they had a problem with Viktor being the one to take her to the Yule Ball, they could man up and fight him for her.

Later — in years to come — when Viktor thought back to this moment, he would realise that there had never been any doubt that he would fight for Heri Potter; whether for her attention or against her enemies, he had been doing so from the very beginning.

_Dear Remus,_

_I normally direct these letters to Sirius since I know you two read my letters together anyway, but I think it's better if the news in this one is filtered by you first before it gets to Sirius. Somehow, I don't think he'll take it gracefully either way._

_So, I have a date to the Yule Ball, and before you send me back a note saying I'm too young to start dating already, know that it's mandatory that I have a partner for the ball because I'm one of the champions. Professor Sprout said something about setting a good example. Now, I normally would be as put out as you undoubtedly are at the moment, but I've been invited by a boy that I think might make the chore at least a little fun._

_The Durmstrang champion, Viktor Krum, asked me to go with him. It was pretty unexpected, but he's a decent sort and we'll both be saved from your respective screaming fans by being each other's shields. It's a pretty mutually-beneficial set up. And he's nice. You know, he asked me to go with him without knowing that I'm 'THE Heri Potter' — he was completely gobsmacked when he found out._

_So, as I'm asking nicely, please inform Sirius in the gentlest way possible. I don't put it past him to come down to the school to try to scare Viktor off. It's obligatory! Please don't make me get in trouble with the professors._

_See you at the next Task!_

_Heri_

_P.S. Please send my cream-coloured dress-robes with the creeping vines design along the hems and bodice. I forgot to pack it and I don't want to go shopping for something else to wear when those are perfectly serviceable._

Transelementation was simple in theory but surprisingly complicated in practice. An increase in size of the base subject added on to this difficulty. There was a _reason_ why the first thing first-years learned was to turn a matchstick into a needle, and why it was amongst the assignments that took the longest for the inexperienced to complete. While not overburdened by a size factor, the match to needle transformation required the conversion of cellulose, hemicelluloses, lignin, and extractives into iron: multiple molecular compounds into a single base metal. It wasn't exactly Alchemy, but for a child still young enough for accidental magic — which tended to be charmwork — it was like trying to put on a shoe that was too small and made for the other foot.

Heri did not have this trouble with transfiguration. If there was one class she could claim that she breezed through with nary an effort as everyone believed, it was transfiguration. If Professor McGonagall's fond words on the matter were to be believed, she had inherited the talent from her
father. This was why she had decided to forgo jumping in the Black Lake in the freezing February chill.

The stands that had been circling the dragon enclosure during the First Task were now all placed along one side of the shore of the Black Lake. Once again, they were packed with people. Heri wondered what kind of show these people were expecting considering the Task would be set underwater. Perhaps the champions would have cameras following them?

By the time Heri got there, the three other champions were milling about. The three headmasters were all seated already, as was Mr. Bagman, but instead of Mr. Crouch, Percy Weasley was seated there.

"Percy?" Heri said, surprised. A smile lit her face. She trotted up to where the redheaded young man was seated. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been promoted!" Percy said brightly, and from his tone, he might have been announcing his election as supreme ruler of the universe. "I'm now Mr. Crouch's personal assistant, and I'm here representing him."

Heri blinked and cried, "I didn't know you got a position in the Department of International Magical Cooperation!" She gave Percy a cheery grin. "Suppose that's what I get for not visiting much last summer. Congratulations! And you're already a personal assistant? You work fast."

Percy beamed and would have said more if it wasn't for Mr. Bagman calling out, "All champions to the starting line, please!"

Heri waved to her friend and made her way to the ribbon stretched out across the sand that served as a starting line. Mr. Bagman placed them at ten feet intervals from each other, and they all began their preparations.

Delacour took off her robes to reveal a periwinkle one-piece swimsuit, earning herself some rude catcalls from the stands that she haughtily ignored, tying her hair back into a messy bun. Cedric stepped out of his cloak in a pair of trunks and a tank-top, shivering visibly and rubbed warmth into his arms. Viktor was already standing in nothing more than a pair of trunks and was glaring at the Lake as if it was some beast to be tackled. In stark contrast, Heri merely removed her boots and stockings, leaving on her winter uniform — thick skirts and heavy cloak all — and her hair pins.

The other gave her funny looks — Viktor looking endearingly confused — but Heri had no plans of getting in that icy lake.

Mr. Bagman returned to the judges' table, pointed his wand at his throat as he had done at the World Cup, and said, "Sonorus!"

His voice boomed out across the dark water toward the stands.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the second Task of the Triwizard Tournament! In this event, our champions will be braving the Black Lake in search for what has been taken from them, which they will have precisely an hour to recover!

"For the viewing pleasure of our audience here today, each champion will be followed by a Watching Eye, which will project their progress onto the crystal tablets everyone has under their seats."

As he spoke, four Watching Eyes — literal eyes with little bat wings attached to the back — flapped over from the judges' table and hovered around the champions' heads. Heri's rushed at her
"Does everyone have their tablet ready?" Mr. Bagman asked, after a moment for the audience to retrieve said object. "Right-o then!

"Well, all our champions appear to be ready . . . We will start on my whistle! Countdown from three, now. Three . . . two . . . one!"

The whistle echoed shrilly in the cold, still air. The stands erupted with cheers and applause.

Paying no mind to the other champions in their advance to the water nor to the Watching Eye trailing after her, Heri padded forward to the edge and removed her transfiguration wand — made from mahogany — from her hair. She now held a wand in each hand. With a steadying breath, she pointed both foci at the water in front of her.

Transfiguring water was a complicated task, as was any classical element, especially if one did not intend to transfigure all of the water. A simple solution that was often overlooked by those unfamiliar with the task was to remove the portion you wanted to transfigure.

With a word and a flick of her holly wand, a glob of water at Heri's feet sprang out of the lake like a breaching dolphin, and was transformed by the mahogany wand into a slab of stone as it landed. Stepping onto the platform she had made for herself, Heri created other slab with two more flicks.

Toss — transform — toss — transform —

Heri did not falter in her steps as her path literally rose to meet her as she quickly strode out toward where she knew the merfolk village was. She had activated her raptor vision as the other champions had jumped in the water and she could now see far enough down to discern the hazy outline of the underwater settlement.

The Watching Eye zoomed out away from her, taking in a wider image of her at work.

When she was directly above the village, Heri bent down to tap on the stone and turned it into glass, letting her see deeper into the murky depths. The visibility was as poor as one would expect when hearing the name 'Black Lake', but the light-magnifying effect of the glass made it possible for Heri to get a good look of the hostages. There was Cho Chang, the girl Cedric really did end up asking to the Yule Ball; a little blonde girl that looked a lot like Delacour; Volkov, Viktor's friend; and none other than Sirius Black himself. All four of them appeared to be under a sleeping or stasis spell with they way they didn't react at all to being tied up underwater.

Considering she was the only one with a connection to Sirius, Heri was pretty sure that he was her hostage.

Now here was the tricky part. She had to get Sirius up, preferably without having to go down herself.

With her wands pointed down, she placed the back of her hands together in front of her. She then sharply moved them apart and began twirl her wrists in an inward motion. The thick sheet of glass beneath her shuddered as a hole formed in the middle, growing bigger the longer Heri swirled her wands.

She stepped back onto the remaining stone when there was more hole than glass platform. The hole was now big enough to fit two Siriuases. Heri considered dropping a weighted hook and reeling him up like a fish, but then Auntie Andromeda would probably scold her for not giving the Head of
the House of Black the proper amount of respect in public.

Wands once again at the ready, Heri directed the rim of the hole to surge downward, her lips mouthing incantations to turn the water that the glass cut through into more glass, fortifying the integrity of the present glass and giving Heri more to work with. The marine creatures darted back from the burrowing glass, leaving empty water to occupy the space in the middle of the circle.

By the time the cylinder of glass reached just above the heads of the hostages, Heri was panting as if she had just run a marathon. For all her natural talent and skill in the art, she was no Transfiguration Master just yet. She paused to catch her breath and survey the area.

Cedric and Viktor were about half of the way back, not making nearly as good of time as Heri was since they had no idea where the merfolk village was and were being restricted by the poor visibility. She couldn't spot Delacour, so the blonde was likely somewhere under Heri's stone walkway.

Breathing stabilised, Heri got back to work. She tossed up bigger blob of water than before, but this time, instead of turning it to stone, she had it arch around the platform she was standing on and the glass cylinder, making a glass dome. She fortified it with two more globs before she made it airtight.

Now effectively a bowl of air upturned on water, Heri detached her impromptu submarine from her stone walkway and directed it to sink, shortening the glass cylinder as she went so she didn't drive glass into any of the hostages. For the sake of speed, she didn't allow herself to admire the scenery; there was a limited supply of air, and while it wouldn't run out for a good twenty more minutes even with two people, she didn't want to run the risk.

Heri absently noted that the Watching Eye was peering in from the outside of the glass, diving in deeper beside her.

A cluster of crude stone dwellings stained with algae loomed out of the gloom on all sides. Here and there at the dark windows, Heri saw faces. The merfolk had greyish skin and long, wild, dark green hair. Their eyes were yellow, as were their broken-looking teeth, and they wore thick ropes of pebbles around their necks. They leered at Heri as she came dropping down; one or two of them emerged from their caves to watch her better, their powerful, silver fish tails beating the water, spears clutched in their hands.

There were gardens of weed around some of them, and she even saw a pet grindylow tied to a stake outside one door. Merfolk were emerging on all sides now, watching her eagerly, pointing at the strange sight she must have made.

Now just inches above Sirius, Heri removed her gloves and rolled up her sleeves. She tuck the mahogany wand back into its place for a moment before she plunged her holly wand into the water, aiming a cutting hex at the ropes binding Sirius. When he was free from the ropes, Heri heaved him up to sprawl beside her.

At once, they were shooting back up.

Sirius came to life and expelled a great spout of water. He turned to Harry with a watery grin. He said, "Wet, this, isn't it?" before the he blinked in bewilderment at Heri's fabulous air pocket.

"Merlin's beard," Sirius breathed, watching in awe as they blurred past fish and other creatures. "You don't do things by half, do you?"
He then noted the Watching Eye and threw up a cheeky peace sign, blowing a raspberry as well.

Heri was pulling her gloves back on while he did so. She shrugged.

"One has to be creative when one wants to retrieve something from a lake without getting wet."

When her sleeves were rolled back down, Heri hit Sirius with a drying charm, hoping it would at least lessen his shivering.

They returned to shore well within the time limit, much to the delight of the crowd and the irritation of two judges in particular. Heri would have felt bad for ruining the chances for their schools to win the Tournament if she didn't dislike them so much.

Madam Pomfrey met them at the edge of Heri's extended pier. She gave Heri a grudgingly approving look for being perfectly dry and unruffled before she bustled Sirius off for a blanket and a warm drink.

"Absolutely ridiculous," the matron muttered. "First death by incineration, now by hypothermia? At least you, Miss Potter, had enough sense to kept yourself out of that freezing water! I suppose next they'll have an underground maze to see if you'll die by being buried alive and asphyxiating!"

Later, after all the champions were back on land and the scoring came in, and after it was declared that Heri and Cedric were tied for lead with Viktor just a few points behind them, Sirius asked her why she went through so much trouble to use transfigurations instead of diving in like the other champions.

"It was brilliant, of course! But that took far more effort than you needed to put in."

Reluctantly, Heri admitted, "Ah, well . . . I—I don't know how to swim . . ."

Later that afternoon, when about to go for a walk with Viktor, Heri combed through her fringe with her fingers. She discovered that she had a beetle in her hair, likely one from the lake that had gotten caught.

"Ew!" Heri grimaced. She hated beetles.

Without further preamble, Heri crushed the bug against a tree, smearing its guts across the bark to make sure it was dead. She shuddered and cleaned her hand with the Scouring Charm.

Disgusting insects dealt with, Heri walked off without a second thought.

On a completely unrelated note, Rita Skeeter went missing. She would be reported missing a few days later by her photographer, but no traces could be found. Inexplicably, she had just disappeared.

As exams approached, the other godborns actually began to wonder if they had completely missed the mark with thinking that Heri's parent was a war deity, and that she was actually an offspring of a knowledge-based god. Or maybe a strategy-based warrior god. It could be Athena or Minerva, the Greek goddess of scholars and warcraft and her Roman aspect; there was Brigid, a Celtic triple goddess of a similar dominion as Athena; or maybe it was Týr, the Norse god of courage and strategy. Really, did Heri have to make it harder for them by having attributes that could go so many different ways?

Classes gained a sense of urgency as students realised they had been slacking in their academic
attentions with the excitement of the Tournament hanging around the castle. The teachers endeavoured to resolved this with the cramming that always happened at this time of the year. With the emphasis on lessons on top of her bulked up training for the Tasks, Heri was actually getting really tired from it. She thought she’d seen the worst of it back when she was still getting used to the Time-Turner!

With an increase in unsettling dreams as well, Heri took to sipping at a thermos of Invigoration Draught through-out her days to keep the edge off.

At the moment, she was in divination. It was particularly hot that day, and the dimly lit classroom was positively sweltering. The fumes from the incense were heavier than ever and it made Heri’s head swim even as she sat at a chair next to one of the curtained windows. She would have used a Cooling Charm on herself, but she didn't have the time before class started — Professor Trelawney was actually really particular about wand-use during class when it wasn't required.

While Professor Trelawney was looking the other way, disentangling her shawl from a lamp, Heri opened her window an inch or so and settled back in her chintz armchair.

Mercifully, a soft breeze played across her face.

"My dears," said Professor Trelawney, sitting down in her winged armchair in front of the class and peering around at them all, "we have almost finished our work on planetary divination. Today, however, will be an excellent opportunity to examine the effects of Mars, for he is placed most interestingly at the present time. If you will all look this way, I will dim the lights . . ."

She waved her wand and the lamps went out. The fire was the only source of light now. Professor Trelawney bent down and lifted, from under her chair, a miniature model of the solar system, contained within a glass dome. It was a beautiful thing; each of the moons glimmered in place around the nine planets and the fiery sun, all of them hanging in thin air beneath the glass.

Heri watched idly as Professor Trelawney began to point out the fascinating angle Mars was making to Neptune. The heavily perfumed fumes washed over her, and the breeze from the window soothed her sweaty skin. She could hear the wind whistling through turrets. Her eyelids began to droop . . .

She was flying, and at an incredible speed — landmarks and lakes blurring as she streaked by. Clouds drifted in and out of her periphery. Crisp wind filled her lungs and a swelling glee bloomed in her belly. She was free!

Elation making her giddy, she set her sights higher, rocketing up into the stratosphere.

Distantly, she hear a voice calling out behind her.

"Do not fly too high!"

Suddenly, she was at sea, overlooking the water from the side of a ship.

Shouting caught her attention, and she turned to see a lion terrorising rough-looking sailors, snarling and chasing them. Oddly enough, the ship was overrun with vines and vegetation that was growing as she looked on. Soon enough, several men fell over the edge into the water. With a roar from the lion, the men turned into dolphins upon impact.

She made to run in the other direction as the lion bounded closer to where she was standing, but then—
She was flying again, this time riding on the back of a giant eagle owl, soaring through the clear blue sky toward an old, ivy-covered house set high on a hillside. Lower and lower they flew, the wind blowing pleasantly in Heri's face, until they reached a dark and broken window in the upper story of the house and entered.

Now they were flying along a gloomy passageway, to a room at the very end . . . through the door they went, into a dark room whose windows were boarded up . . .

Heri was suddenly on her own two feet . . . she was watching, now, as the owl fluttered across the room, into a chair with its back to her . . . There were two dark shapes on the floor beside the chair . . . both of them were stirring . . .

One was a huge snake . . . it was oddly familiar . . . the other was a man . . . a wiry, tall man, with sharp features and a tears streaking down his face . . . he was wheezing and sobbing on the hearthrug . . .

"You are in luck," said a cold, high-pitched voice from the depths of the chair in which the owl—four legs; was that Hedwig?—had landed. "You are very fortunate that this vessel was created in time. Your blunder has not ruined everything."

"My Lord!" gasped the man on the floor. "My Lord, I am . . . I am so pleased . . . and so sorry . . . ."

The snake hissed. Heri could see its tongue fluttering.

"Now," said the cold voice. Voldemort. "Perhaps one more little reminder why I will not tolerate another blunder from you . . ."

"My Lord . . . I beg you . . ."

The tip of a wand emerged from around the back of the chair.

"Crucio!"

There was a scream, a scream as though every nerve in that person's body were on fire. The screaming filled Heri's ears as the scar on her forehead seared with pain; she was yelling too . . . Voldemort would hear her, would know she was there —!

"Heri! Heri!"

Heri opened her eyes. She was lying on the floor of Professor Trelawney's room with her hands over her face. Her scar was burning so badly that her eyes were watering. The pain had been real!

The whole class was standing around her, and Professor Trelawney was kneeling next to her.

"Are you all right?" said Sally-Anne, looking thoroughly shaken.

"Of course she isn't!" said Professor Trelawney, looking thoroughly excited. Her great eyes magnified by her glasses loomed over Heri, gazing at her. "What was it, Potter? A premonition? An apparition? What did you see?"

"I . . . I don't . . ." Heri stammered. She sat up. She could feel himself shaking. She couldn't stop herself from looking around, into the shadows behind her; Voldemort's voice had sounded so close . . .
"You were clutching your scar!" said Professor Trelawney. "You were thrashing on the floor, clutching your scar! My dear, you were undoubtedly stimulated by the extraordinary clairvoyant vibrations of my room!"

Heri shuddered and clutched at her forehead.

"If that's what happened, professor, maybe I need to get some fresh air. That was horrible."

"If you leave now, you may lose the opportunity to see further—!

"Please, professor!" said Parvati Patil, her eyes watery. "We should at least get her something for her headache! My mother gets awful migraines and she can barely think without some sort of pain relief!"

"Of course, of course," replied the professor. "Let's get you up, dear."

Heri was helped back into her seat. As Professor Trelawney went to fetch a Headache Relief from her cupboard, the window was thrown open wider and someone began fanning her with a handkerchief.

"Now, Miss Potter," said the professor when she returned. She handed Heri the potion. "Let's discuss your vision."

Heri chugged the potion and sighed as the throbbing in her scar lessened immediately.

"Honestly, professor, I don't know what to make of it. First I was flying above the clouds, headed towards the sun; then I was standing on a ship with a lion that was attacking people and turning them into dolphins; and then I watched as someone was put under the Crucius."

Heri was eventually given permission to leave early to visit the Hospital Wing. Since Professor Trelawney was convinced that the burning incense caused her visions, Heri resolved to wear her air-filtering scarf over her nose to divination lessons from now on.

Heri was not having a good time of it. First there had been that bloody cop-out of a Third Task, then she was attacked by an acromantula far larger than what would have been allowed to live by the Forbidden Forest herd, and now she was tied to a gods-be-damned headstone in some sodding graveyard.

And it was fucking raining.

She couldn't think of any way to make this shitty day any shittier.

When Mr. Bagman had announced that there'd be a huge free-for-all in which they'd be set loose on a labyrinth to fight their way to the Triwizard Cup, Heri had been expecting something exciting like a battle royale in an underground cavern. Instead she got a hedge maze out on the Quidditch Pitch with some of Hagrid's pets to play with.

What the fuck? That was it? A third-year CoMC class with Hagrid was more dangerous!

She had been in there for a good half an hour without anything happening to her, just dead-ends. The only positive was that she hadn't run into any of the beasties Cedric was complaining about whenever they crossed paths, so she wasn't getting fatigued, and even then she would have been happier with something to kill instead of just wandering around like she was.
Heri was ready to just set fire to the hedge when something out of the ordinary finally happened.

There was a sphinx blocking the way. It had the body of an over-large lion: great clawed paws and a long yellowish tail ending in a brown tuft. Its head and front torso, however, was that of a woman. She turned her long, almond-shaped eyes upon Heri as she approached.

She spoke in a deep, hoarse voice.

"You are very near your goal. The quickest way is past me."

"So . . . so, will you move, please?" Heri had asked, scrounging up some manners despite her dreadful mood.

The sphinx refused, telling Heri that she had to answer riddle if she wanted to get to the other side. She could either get the riddle correct and be allowed to pass, or get it wrong and have to fight the sphinx.

"First think of the person who lives in disguise,
Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.
Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,
The middle of middle and end of the end?
And finally give me the sound often heard
During the search for a hard-to-find word.
Now string them together, and answer me this,
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"

Heri gaped at her. Good gods, did she look like she was in any position to answer a riddle that came in sonnet form? She wasn't taking an English Lit. class, she was in the middle of a sodding labyrinth!

Heri let the sphinx know that she was going with option three, not answering, by giving her cloak to the likely freezing bare-breasted desert creature and turning herself to mist to seep through the walls of the hedge. She was so done. She had her fill of the shitty maze and wanted out at once.

Of course, that was when the ruddy acromantula had to show up. Where in the nine circles of Dante’s Inferno had they been hiding that beast? It couldn't have been in the Forest because Magorian, Bane and Firenze’s herd leader, would have ordered it killed on sight; it was nearly the size of Aragog and had no human sentimentality. She didn't know any spells that would work on acromantula exoskeleton, so she caught up its legs with her tendrils and stabbed it with the venomous end of her slingshot until it stopped moving.

If it was only a mildly crappy day, that would have been the point where Heri would reach the Triwizard Cup and finally be done with the blasted tournament. She was not at all surprised when it turned out it was going to be one of those really shitty days, and she instead got portkeyed away from the school altogether.

She had obviously travelled miles — perhaps hundreds of miles — for even the mountains surrounding the castle were gone. The black outline of a small church was visible beyond a large
yew tree to her right. A hill rose above her to her left. Heri could just make out the outline of a fine old house on the hillside.

She had been caught unaware with a Stunner while she had been reorienting herself after her landing. She had just regained consciousness to find that whoever it was had tied her up proper while she was out, binding her wrists behind her and her ankles together. Of course, she could free herself with her tendrils, but she wanted to know what the bloody Hell was going on and whom it was she would be beating the piss out of when she got free.

She had a bleeding gouge in her right arm as well and she wasn't happy in the least bit about it.

Cue over-the-top entrance and melodramatic monologue.

A twitchy blond that looked like he'd been shooting up the good stuff came striding out from the mist. (Yep, there was even mist.) With the murkiness of the rain and the haziness of the fog, it should have been an entrance worthy of Hamlet's Three Witches; instead, squirrel man came shimmying forward like his body had forgotten how to produce heat with a swaddled baby on his hip. He then proceeded to ramble about his evil plans — because of course there was an evil plan — but Heri had peeked in on the Dursley's movie-nights and had been through variations of this song and dance enough times that she could have spoken his monologue for him and likely done a better job.

'Blah, blah, I have you now, Heri Potter/Little Hero/Girl Who Lived. Blah-blah, blah, no one can stop me, yada-yada. I will achieve the whatever that no one has before, and blah-di-blah," — (some preening here) — "blahblahblah, all the whoever will do who-fucking-cares-what." — (some boasting and strutting) — "I/my master/my people/my ex-boyfriend that I just got back with will be the supreme imperial Sith master god-king of the intergalactic, multi-dimensional cosmos and bring forth ten thousand years of death and darkness.

'WHOO! DARKNESS! Can I get a whoop-whoop up in here for eeee-vil?'

Honestly, Heri was watching his lips move, but she was too busy being outraged and pissed about being kidnapped and assaulted to pay attention to the words.

But there was one thing that Heri just didn't get, and she was so far beyond done that she didn't even try to censor herself any more.

"Why the bloody Hell do you have a baby?"

The freakshow stopped mid-sentence, his mouth opening and closing without any sound, as if he hadn't realised that Heri was capable of speech.

Heri held back a sigh; while this was the most over-the-top capture she'd been involved in yet, the bad-guy could use some work.

He then flushed angrily, taking a threatening step toward her.

"You DARE—?"

"I SURE DO!" Heri hollered, kicking her feet ineffectively. "Do you expect me to take you seriously when you've got a bloody baby on your hip? Think again, Rumpelstiltskin!"

An angry hissing rent the air, sending a chill up Heri's spine. The bundle in Blondie's arms writhed.

"Barty, silence the girl! And get on with it!"
O-kay, then. Definitely not a baby.

'Barty' pried her mouth open and shoved a wad of cloth in before he set the bundled hellspawn down and disappeared out of her view.

Heri shrieked angrily around the cloth, but it did a good job of muffling any noise she made. Oh, she was going to hurt him!

He then came back within Heri's range of vision, pushing a stone cauldron to the foot of the grave. It was full of what seemed to be water — Heri could hear it slopping around — and it was larger than any cauldron she had ever used; a great stone belly large enough for a full-grown man to sit in.

The Hell? Was he going to try to cook and eat her?

The thing inside the bundle of robes on the ground was stirring more persistently, as though it was trying to free itself. The dead-man-walking was busying himself at the bottom of the cauldron with a wand. Suddenly there were crackling flames beneath it.

The liquid in the cauldron began to heat at an incredible rate. The surface began not only to bubble, but to send out fiery sparks, as though it were on fire. The steam was thickening, blurring the outline of Barty tending the fire.

The movements beneath the robes became more agitated. Heri heard the revolting voice of the not-baby again.

"Hurry!"

The surface of the water was alight with sparks now. It might have been encrusted with diamonds.

"It is ready, Master."

"Now . . ."

Barty pulled open the robes on the ground, revealing what was inside them, and Heri let out a screech that was strangled in the wad of material blocking her mouth.

It was as though someone had flipped over a stone and revealed the ugly and slimy parasitic creature that lived underneath — but worse, a hundred times worse. The thing Barty had been carrying had the rough shape of a crouched toddler, except there had never been anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly-looking, a dark, raw, reddish black, as if a pregnant reptile had died and its belly had split open from decay to reveal its rotting stillborn fetus. The arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face — no child alive ever had a face like that — flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes.

She knew those wicked eyes.

Voldemort.

Abomination! Monstrosity! Heri couldn't help but writhe in utter disgust. It was an obscene crime against nature, the anathema of the sanctity of life, an unforgivable corruption of a child's body! She didn't want to think about what must have happened to the vessel for that horrible fiend to assume such a form.
Despite its gut-wrenching appearance and origins, Voldemort's vessel appeared to be entirely helpless; it raised its thin arms, put them around Barty's neck, and allowed Barty to lift it. How the man could even bear the touch was beyond her. Barty then carried it to the cauldron and lowered the creature in; there was a hiss, and it vanished below the surface; Heri heard its frail body hit the bottom with a soft thud.

Bart began adding other ingredients to the mangled-fetus soup, tossing in a dry femur bone and even his own hand as he chanted for the cauldron: "Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son;/Flesh of the servant, willingly given, you will revive your master;/Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe."

At 'blood of the enemy', Barty took out a phial of fresh blood from his robe and uncorked it.

Heri stiffened in realisation. Vision going red with fury, she shot a tendril out to swat the phial to the ground before Barty could pour it in. Like Hell she was going to let any part of herself be used in some disgusting ritual, one to re-body Voldemort to boot! Seven more tendrils sprang out, undoing the ropes around her and pulling her up as the idiot cried out in horror at the loss of her blood.

"WHAT THE —?"

But Heri was already upon him, tendrils latching onto him and restraining his movement. He managed a Cutting Curse that sliced off an appendage that had gone for his wand hand, but that hand was soon captured as well, being broken in the process. She heaved him up and then brought him back down to smash his head against the ground, breaking his nose and knocking him unconscious.

Heri hissed at the pain of losing one of her tendrils, but beyond the shortened limb being sucked back in to be replaced with another, she suffered no setback from it. It stung in the way a banged and skinned knee would, but thankfully, they didn't have enough physicality to sustain greater damage.

She looked down to observed her severed limb. It was leaking a strange golden fluid and thrashing about in the way a lopped off octopus tentacle would, but already it was dissipating. As she watched, it disassembled into smoke and faded away.

Their use complete, the other tendril were pulled back in.

Eyes flicking up again, Heri snarled at the cauldron. She dug into her hip pouch that had miraculously not been taken from her and pulled out her slingshot. She was taking no chances when it came to this necromantic bullocks. She unsheathed the venomous end and held it at the ready.

Holding back her bile, Heri gave the enormous cauldron a mighty shove, spilling the loathsome contents out onto the sodden mud. Bone, blood, dismembered hand, squalling homunculus and all came pouring out, staining the earth and fouling the air with vomit-inducing reek.

This close to Voldemort, Heri's scar nearly split her head open with pain. Not letting herself hesitate, Heri lunged at the vessel, ignored the burning pain from physical contact with Voldemort, and brought the venomous fang down on its head.

An ear-piercing screech like metal being scraped over broken glass filled the air. Heri ignored the wretched noise to jerk the fang to the side, shattering through fragile forehead bone and gouging up a slitted eyeball. Completely overtaken by her battle senses, Heri could only keep slashing away at the abomination, determined to end its revolting existence.

The damage finally became too much for the vessel to continue clinging onto life. As it became little more that a pile of mutilated flesh and bone fragments, Voldemort's wraithly spirit manifested in
a murky, grey wisp above it before he went... *poofing*... away, disappearing like mist before Heri could do anything else.

A silence fell over the graveyard.

With all known danger dealt with, Heri slumped into herself, breathing deeply to settle her nerves. She grabbed her right arm and cradled it to her chest. When her heart-rate picked up, the wound began bleeding more quickly. On top of adrenaline withdrawal, she was also light-headed from blood-loss. She had to get herself medical attention soon.

Now running on force of will, Heri heaved herself to her feet. There was no time to waste when there was a psychopath still untied and you needed to stem your bleeding.

She staggered toward the unconscious Barty, Summoning the rope when she saw it. In a thrice, she had the slobbering minion hogtied and gagged. Not knowing what else to do with him, she left him where he had landed, hitting him with a Stunner so he wouldn't be waking up any time soon. She took his wand as well. If nothing prevented it, whatever authorities she'd eventually get it contact with would come take him away.

Heri was about to heal herself with a flesh-knitting spell, but stopped before the words left her mouth. She didn't know how to Apparate yet and she didn't have one of Sirius' emergency portkeys on her, so she'd have to go down into the muggle village for help. It would look mightily suspicious if she claimed kidnapping and assault if she was covered in blood without a wound on her.

Heri sighed and instead did a partial variation, not healing the wound completely, but making it smaller so it wouldn't keep gushing the way it was. She tore a strip from Barty's robes to wrap it up to stem the flow even more.

Heri cast a notice-me-not on her hip pouch before sticking the wands in her hair with her extras. Wearing a dirty, blood-covered but obviously expensive school uniform, Heri hoped to pass as a rich man's daughter that had been abducted to be held for ransom by a violent kidnapper.

Shivering in the cool drizzle, Heri began her trudge toward civilisation. She considered going to the church, but she didn't know if anyone would be in at that time of day, and she wasn't really comfortable with the idea of entering a place of worship for a religion she didn't share. The big house on the hill was also a no-go since it was very obviously abandoned. Her only option seemed to be the village proper.

Coming down from the hill, she came to a country lane bordered by high, tangled hedgerows. She followed the lane for a few minutes until she came to a wooden signpost that was sticking out of the brambles on the left-hand side of the road.

Pausing, Heri looked up at the sign's two arms. The one pointing back the way she had come read: *Greater Hangleton, 8 kilometres*. The arm pointing in the direction she was headed read: *Little Hangleton, 1 kilometre*. She was relieved that she was headed in the direction of the closer location.

She continued walking on with nothing to see but the hedgerows until the lane curved to the left and fell away, sloping steeply down a hillside. She had a sudden, unexpected view of a whole valley laid out in front of her.

Her eyes widened when she realised that she had seen this hillside and valley before. Gods, this was where she had flown past during her vision in divination!

*(Not far now, not far now, not far now...)*
The lane curved sharply to the right and when she rounded the corner, and she nearly missed a gap in the hedge. Despite her self-imposed goals, she surveyed the path through the gap, a narrow dirt track bordered by higher and wilder hedgerows than those of the main road. Without knowing why, she turned onto this path, wandering further in.

The path was crooked, rocky, and potholed, sloping downhill like the last one, and it seemed to be heading for a patch of dark trees. With the greyness of the rainy sky, the old trees ahead cast deeper, darker shadows than it would have on a sunny day. Blinking rapidly and activating her raptor vision, Heri discerned a building half-hidden amongst the tangle of trunks.

It seemed to her to be a very strange location to choose for a house, or else an odd decision to leave the trees growing nearby, blocking all light and the view of the valley below. She idly wondered if it was inhabited; its walls were mossy and so many tiles had fallen off the roof that the rafters were visible in places. Nettles grew all around it, their tips reaching the windows, which were tiny and thick with grime. No, it was likely abandoned.

Still caught up in her odd compulsion, Heri approached the dilapidated shack.

As she came to the door, she noted that there was a dead snake nailed to it. She wrinkled her nose. Unnecessary cruelty combined with poor taste in decorating; it chafed at her sensibilities. She summon'd out the nails holding the poor creature in place and toed it off into the grass for a more peaceful resting place.

Stepping into the house, Heri could see it that it seemed to contain three tiny rooms. Two doors led off the main room, which served as kitchen and living room combined. She assumed the doors led to the bedrooms. Everything in sight was covered in several layers of dust. Parts of the roof had caved in, revealing ragged ceiling beams.

Now that she was inside, the strange urge that had struck her had doubled. As if being pulled forward by some invisible rope (This way, this way, this way . . .), Heri walked over to a section of rotting floorboards by the antiquated stove and knelt down.

She pried up a couple of boards, absently noting that they weren’t nailed down at all. Underneath, sitting there as if it had been waiting for her to find it, was a small, hand-sized, golden chest. Unadorned and unlocked, it opened easily when she pulled the lid up. Sitting proudly within was a gold ring inlaid with a black stone.

Heri picked up the ring and inspected it. Honestly, it was a rather unassuming ring, no extra gems or anything. The stone wasn't even precious, just a smoothed over pebble one might find in a riverbed. The only thing that set it apart was the odd coat-of-arms it was engraved with. Well, she called it a coat-of-arms, but it actually looked more like a primitive sigil. How odd.

(Touch it, touch it, touch it . . .)

She reached a finger up to stroke the stone but flinched at an unexpected prick at that finger. Putting the ring down for a moment, Heri saw that there was a splinter in her forefinger, a rather thick one at that. She must have caught it when she was pulling up the floorboards.

With a swift pluck, the sliver of wood was removed. A bead of blood welled up at the pinprick, Heri watched idly as it swelled and eventually dripped off her finger.

A shriek of pain made Heri jolt. She immediately looked down at where the sound was coming from. Her drop of blood had landed on the ring, in the dead-centre of the stone. It now trembled where it sat, a moaning, keening sound of pain coming from it.
As she watched, a cracked formed down the centre and her blood seeped into the crevice. This proved to be too much for the ring — a wisp of smoke (eerily reminiscent of Voldemort's wraith form) oozed out of the crack, roiling and bubbling. The wisp churned angrily for a moment before it finally dissipated.

Heri blinked rapidly, trying to understand what had just happened. She shook her head sharply to relieve the fuzziness and got back to her feet. This impromptu detour was already too weird. It was best if she got going.

Without thinking, she picked up the ring again and slipped it on her free ring-finger.

She was unconscious before she even hit the floor.

---

**Ninúš-didi . . . Ninúš-didi . . . Ninúš-didi. . . .**

What?

**Kìma parsi labiruti . . . sa belet ersetım ki'äm parsusa . . .**

**Ninúš-didi. . . .**

**My lady, can ye hear me . . . ?**

What was going on? She tried to open her eyes but couldn't tell if she achieved it.

**'Tis nearly time . . . your time cometh . . . Ninúš-didi . . . he doth awaken. . . .**

Was someone there? Was someone talking to her? She tried to speak but she couldn't feel her mouth.

**Soo-oon . . . 'Twill all be over soon . . . But for now . . . your lady mother cometh. . . .**

**Sleep now . . . the end is nigh . . .**

**Annu harrani sa alaktasa la tarat . . . Eli baltuti ima'idu mituti. . . .**

**Ninúš-didi . . . sada emedu. . . .**

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There was a very public uproar when the Girl Who Lived was abducted in the middle of the Triwizard Tournament in the Scottish Highlands only to be found the next day over three hundred miles away in the Midlands of England. The DMLE had been sent in along with a team of Obliviators when they learned via an owl from one of her friend's mother that she received a telephone call from the missing girl, explaining that she was in a muggle village and needed assistance.

She was retrieved and returned to her frantic family and friends post-haste.

The unrest grew when it was discovered that the kidnapper was none other than Bartemius Crouch Jr., son of the Head of the Department of Magical Cooperation, former inmate of Azkaban, and previously presumed dead man. With a breakout from Azkaban coming to light two years in a row when there previously had never been even one, the suitability of Cornelius Fudge's administration came under questioning. In fact, a call rose up for the spring-cleaning of all ministry departments. The fact that it came to be known that Crouch Jr. had been trying to resurrect He-Who-
Must-Not-Be-Named lent fuel to the fire.

Chapter End Notes

AN1: Shout-outs to Blueowl's Mysterious Thing, Time for the information about how crayons affect runes, and to Silently Watches' The Black Princess for parts of the confrontation with the dragon. I recommend the first story if you like time-travel, Good!Dumbledore, magic theory, and cuteness involving baby Harry; it's unfinished, but definitely worth it. I highly recommend the second story if you like a good Dark!Fem!Harry, excellent magical theory, and getting pulled in to the point where you cackle along with the anti-hero lead.

AN2: All Hogwarts students are canon even if you're not familiar with their names. I consider all things from the books, movies, and video-games as canon and use the characters used in them instead of creating OCs. It's remarkably difficult to include Durmstrang students when literally none of them are named, but I hope my re-appropriation of names from other parts of canon wasn't jarring for anyone.
Interlude

Chapter Notes

This chapter will be mostly a collection of letters. There will be implied gaps of time between each letter, and some will refer to other letters that I didn't include in writing.

* I read on the wikia that a more realistic conversion rate for the Galleon would be about £25 instead of £5, so we'll be working with that rate instead. Makes that Triwizard Tournament prize money more tempting, doesn't it? Trust me when I say that the calculations for Heri purchasing things was a pain and a half! 29 Knuts (省内) to a Sickle (偈) and 17 Sickles to a Galleon ( обеспечение); transfer that into the American Dragot (and thus having to make up shit) and work in a new conversion rate, and I ended up spending way too much time keeping it accurate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Dear Hagrid,_

_Letters from me will, unfortunately, be infrequent this summer. Sirius is packing us up to my family's home in Massachusetts, a state on the east coast of the United States, and a transatlantic flight isn't something I would inflict on an owl too frequently. Even a troublesome one like Hedwig. I will try to make my letters longer to compensate._

_Sirius reckons we could use some time away from England. That and Bramblewood Hall could use some tidying up. It's been left empty since before I was born, so I expect that it'll be a similar state that our London townhouse was in before. Hopefully there'll be fewer pest infestations to clean out, as I've come to really hate doxies._

_We leave as soon as I send out this letter. We'll be taking a ship a lot like the one the Durmstrang students arrived in last year. I've heard it's a lot faster than a muggle ship, and if that's true it'll be a good thing, because Remus gets motion sickness._

_I hope to see creatures native to the country when we get there, and I'll be sure to tell you all about them. Is there anything in particular you're curious about?_  

_Love,_

_Heri_

_____________________

_Dear Heri,_

_The colonies are a bit far away even if you are trying to get away from England. I know that the Ministry clean-up movement is holding you up as a symbol for the cause, but I didn't expect it to get to you so quickly. Has it been awful then?_  

_Zach's dad is part of the evaluation committee sweeping through the Departments, he says that they're fanning the flames to build up public indignity so that the issue won't be pushed aside before they can finish. Zach's been calling it 'The Purge'_.
You're not staying over there, are you? The monsters are more widespread over there, and they aren't controlled the same as over here. The Americans are pretty 'live and let live' with their creature-related laws according to my dad. Be safe, okay?

– Ernie

—

CADERWHAIL'S CROSS-STITCH

Handicraft Emporium


PAYMENT . . . . . . . ITEM

00Đ, 04₮, 07₴ . . . 1 Articulated Mannequin, 12 in...
02Đ, 15₮, 05₴ . . . 1 Adjustable Body Form, 5 ft...
00Đ, 14₮, 19₴ . . . 1 Saget's 62 Pastels Assorted Chalk...
00Đ, 01₮, 10₴ . . . 1 Bluebell's 40 Spools Assorted Thread Set...
00Đ, 12₮, 06₴ . . . 1 Brambleberry's Assorted Color Yarn Basket...
00Đ, 10₮, 02₫ . . . 1 Tilinsky's 150-Pack Embroidery Floss...
01Đ, 09₮, 00₴ . . . 1 Miss Honey's Expanded-space Sewing Kit...
02Đ, 11₮, 00₴ . . . 1 Miss Honey's Resizeable Sewing Machine...
00Đ, 04₮, 00₴ . . . 1 Augustine's 800pcs Pearl-head Pins...
00Đ, 04₮, 00₴ . . . 1 Cyan Selkie's Bucket O' Buttons™, 16 Oz...
00Đ, 12₮, 00₴ . . . 1 Blue w/ White Polka Dots Cotton, 4 yd...
00Đ, 12₮, 00₴ . . . 1 Pink Striped Cotton, 4 yd...
01Đ, 24₮, 00₴ . . . 1 White Cotton, 8 yd...
00Đ, 11₮, 00₴ . . . 1 White Floral Pattern Lace Trim, 10 yd...

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . TOTAL: 14Đ, 07₮, 20₴

—

Remus almost wanted to cry when he saw the total at the bottom of the receipt. Heri had come back from an afternoon in town with a bill for over 14 Dragots! That was nearly 17 Galleons!* And that was just one shop! If he didn't know any better, he would have sworn that Heri was Sirius' child — their ability to rack up such an astonishing bill in so little time was exactly the same.

Remus eyed the other bags Heri was moving to the table. He almost didn't want to ask about those.
"You realise this is more than we spend on groceries in a week," said Remus, keeping his tone mild. He noted that Heri was looking rather tired.

Heri blinked at him sleepily. She smiled vaguely and rubbed at the corner of one of her eyes.

"I suppose so. Thankfully, these will last me quite a bit longer than a week, and I won't have to buy any more any time soon. That's the beauty of buying in bulk."

Remus sighed.

"But why on earth do you even need . . ." he checked the receipt again, "eight hundred pins and a 16-ounce bucket of buttons?"

Heri shrugged, going back to taking her things from the bags.

"I meant to just pop in for more embroidery floss since the bit that I brought with me ran out, but they were having this massive sale — discounts and bonuses right, left, and centre! — and I've been wanting to try making my own clothes for a while now, so when I saw they had body forms and such at half-price, I just had to get them."

"And . . . and the buttons and pins and everything else?"

"Well, you can't expect me to walk into a sale and not take advantage of the discounts!" Heri gave him a disbelieving look. "They were practically giving things away! Goodness, two of these bags are actually filled with just the bonuses!

"Do you know how much Miss Honey goes for back home? Almost triple! Madam Malkin swears by it. Some mad old hag nearly ripped my arms out trying to get that sewing machine from me when I picked it up. Then I got into a scuffle with some chit that tried to nick my thread when she thought I wasn't looking! And don't even get me started on that queue for fabric cutting . . ."

That was when Sirius came back.

"Remus!" Sirius called, flinging the front door open and bounding in. "Come see all these wicked new parts I bought for my motorbike! It's going to look so badass when I'm done!"

Remus suppressed the urge to sigh.

_Dear Dora,_

_Massachusetts is lovely. I expected it to be like how America's portrayed in films, but I suppose there's a reason why this part of the States is called New England. It's a pity you didn't come with us; Manchester-by-the-Sea is exactly where you would think it was located. We're rubbing elbows with Salem as well._

_The magical shopping district's overflowing with wicked shops, and I'm not ashamed to say that I've spent a goodly amount of time already schlepping back and forth between the shops and the beach. You would love it — every witch and wizard under the age of forty dresses exactly like you, and the rest dress like hippies and pilgrims. The lack of robes is rather odd to me now after all these years, but I suppose since their country is so young in comparison to the rest of the world, they're not as separated from muggle trends as we are. I find that the happy medium here is growing on me._

_The house is finally clean enough that a house-elf won't drop dead at the sight of it, so we'll be_
looking for one tomorrow. Or rather, an equivalent to a house-elf — the poor dears are rather scarce in this part of the world, so we might have to invite the services of a brownie or a hobgoblin instead. The house should be all set by the end of next week, so once we get everything squared away, you really must come for a visit. Sirius and Remus are lovely, but they’re not much for girl-talk.

Give Auntie Andromeda and your father my love,

Heri

Dear Heri,

It’s a shame that you are unavailable this summer — my family and I are visiting Greece, and my mother had been looking forward to having another girl join with us. Perhaps next year, then. In the meantime, you could attend one of my future Quidditch games to make up for the loss of the pleasure of your company.

How are things in America? I was once involved in a school-sanctioned letter-exchange with a student from Ilvermorny, but a description from someone else who’s not a native will likely be less biased. Have you seen a Quodpot game yet? I’ve been told it’s all the rage over there.

Do stay safe wherever you are. I’ve heard that the MACUSA is very hands-off in their governing of the people.

— Viktor

Dear Miss Potter,

It is never a bother to answer questions of inquisitive students, no matter what time of year it is. Admittedly, I was not anticipating correspondence during the summer holidays, but that does not detract from the validity of your questions. Do not hesitate to contact me with your questions in the future; it is a teacher’s prerogative to cultivate the minds of future generations.

Regarding the matter of transfiguring an abiotic base into a substance that mimics mammalian biomaterial, you must keep Baumgartner’s Third Principle in mind, that . . .

Dear Andi,

I’m really starting to worry about Heri. She’s been out of sorts since the school year ended, and now she’s fainted several times. That dangerous, isn’t it? For her brain, right? Remus and I can’t figure out what’s causing it even though we’re rather certain it’s magically influenced. The muggle healer we took her to says he couldn’t find anything wrong with her, so it has to be magic, but we can’t find any traces of a hex or a jinx on her. She says she’s fine, but conking out randomly during the day isn’t exactly the sign of complete health, is it?

We’re taking her to another healer tomorrow, but it would make me feel better if I had your professional opinion on it. Do you know what could be wrong?

— Sirius

Dear Sirius,
Have you found out yet if it's being caused by a spell or not? The only thing to do if it's being caused by a spell is to get it cancelled. If it's **not** magic . . . well, is Heri fainting or falling asleep?

If it's fainting, it could be caused by acute emotional distress resulting in a sort of panic attack. If she's having sleep attacks, it could be narcolepsy, which can happen to those that have had head injuries. Honestly, there's no 'cure' that I know of if it's either cases, as those are not so much injuries of the body but of the mind.

I'm more a medi-witch than a proper healer, but if such blackouts continue, I would recommend Wideye Potion and assigning someone to stay with her to make sure she doesn't collapse in a way that could hurt herself. I'm quite serious about having someone stick with her, Sirius; if it's narcolepsy, collapses can happen anywhere, and I don't want her accidentally bashing her head on something and potentially making things worse.

*Keep me informed on how it goes.*

Love,

Andromeda

---

**Dear Auntie Andromeda,**

Thank you for your recommendations. I would have thought to use an Invigoration Draught or Girding Potion, but I suppose it's not physical exhaustion that's making me drop.

The healer I was taken to said that there was no indication of me being under the influence of any spell or potion, so my condition must be caused by natural means. From the symptoms, she says it a form of narcolepsy, just like you suggested. It seems that this is something I'll be living with for a while. No tears though, it could be worse; having sleep attacks is among the least harmful medical conditions I can think of.

In any case, the Wideye Potion has been very effective, as has the other potion Healer Gosling prescribed. My new handmaiden, a bogle named Oleander, has proven to be excellent company as well.

Now that I'm thinking on it, it's a spot of good luck that we're in the States. Or rather, it's very fortunate that there are so many different types of magical creatures in this country. Hurrah for migration! Just the other day, Remus suggested finding another house-elf (or some other sort of hob) to attend to me personally (a bit much in my opinion, but what can you do?) when we came across Ollie teasing the neighbours' cat. Our surprise was shared since she's rather young and had never encountered wizards before.

Can you imagine? A magical creature that's only even known Muggles!

I'd never heard of a bogle before, but the encyclopaedia of North American magical creatures I got from the shop says that they share ancestry with both boggarts and brownies and that they're shapeshifters with Being-level intelligence. So, they're rather like House-elves, but with the ability to disguise themselves, and without the intrinsic necessity to serve. They're described to reach an average of a five-year-old human child's body mass in any form when fully mature, and have long prehensile tongues that remain the same in any shape. They're said to be fond of frightening people like boggarts do, but Ollie hasn't shown any such inclination so far.

The best part, I think, is that Ollie can assume a human form. I thought I was going to have to
stay in the house all day for the rest of the summer — I wouldn't have been able to take a house-elf or any other hob around town, of course. That would have brought down the fun of holidaying in another country, you know? Thankfully, Ollie passes very well for a little girl (she's in adolescence, so she's roughly the proportions of a four-year-old), and we've had a grand time out and about.

She's been lovely, really. It's rather like how I imagine having a younger sister would be. Of course, Ollie's been very solicitous, but she doesn't have any duties outside of making sure I don't collapse at inopportune times, so it's very easy to treat her like any other child. She's the cutest thing! She's got the pointed ears all Hobs have, bright blue eyes, and an upturned, twitchy nose just like a rabbit. She's so huggable, I can hardly put her down!

Anyway, before I drag this letter out any longer, could I ask you to send your recipe for the Wideye Potion? Neither the one we get from the Apothecary nor the one I make with the standard recipe is as good as the one you sent along with your last letter. They're effective enough I suppose, but they don't taste anywhere near as nice.

Hoping you receive this in good health,

Heri

---

Dear Heri,

I'm not sure if I should believe your claims. Goth as the standard basis of fashion? Way to fulfil a stereotype. Why don't they just grow warts and snog it out with hellspawn while they're at it? Ugh, please, tell me you're joking.

By the way, what did you get for No. 8 on the arithmancy packet? I'm properly stumped. I'm absolutely horrid at gematria, and the bottom half of the page is nothing but. I might have to drop the class after O.W.L.s if this continues.

— Sally-Anne

---

Dear Heri,

Out of all the things that have been asked of me, the school books I no longer have need of are definitely among the oddest. You must be more studious than I originally thought. You realise that the curriculum of Durmstrang is quite a bit different than Hogwarts? Not to mention that I'm quite certain that we do not share the same academic interests. I have sent them along with this letter, of course, but what use they will be to you I don't know.

— Viktor

---

Dear Heri,

If it wasn't selfish of me, I'd demand you return immediately. You have no idea how annoying Megan's becomes without you around! I thought she was a huge blabbermouth normally, but it's like she's decided to dial it up to eleven! The only time she hasn't been getting on my nerves recently has been when Zacharias was around, and that's only because we all know he would have her running home in tears if she got him started.

Bless her, we've had some good times together, but it's like she presses all my buttons all at once
when she gets started. Not even Malfoy irks me as badly!

Just the other day, we met some cute boys at a Quidditch game, and just when I thought Sally-Anne had charmed their de facto leader into inviting us to get ice cream with them, Megan starts running her mouth about how much of a Quidditch expert she is because of her pro player sister and scares them off! Not even the fool that was dribbling all over himself at her fawning stuck around!

It’s like she had absolutely no concept of how human interaction works. She’d be golden if she’d just stop talking over everyone else during conversations. It’s enough to make me want to scream!

Come back soon and rescue me!

— Hannah

D ear Hannah,

I’m afraid that Sirius doesn’t plan on us leaving any time soon. He’s become quite enamoured with small-town life and is drinking in the anonymity with gusto. There’s not likely to be any protest from Remus either, since he is rather taken with the charms of New England as well. Maybe you could go on a trip of your own? I mean, if you truly need some time away from Megan . . .

Do try to be easier on her — her enthusiasm runs away with her and she doesn’t realise that not everyone shares the same interests.

Speaking of presumptuous enthusiasm, my cousin Dora has been visiting, and in her giddiness of her first time having time off from work, she’s volunteered me to be a babysitter for a child we met at a play-park.

I’ve told you about Ollie, right? Well, she expressed interest in the swings we saw on our way home from the beach, and while I was teaching her how to make the swing work, Dora struck up a conversation with the gentleman pushing his own child at the next seat over. Work and irregular schedules must have come up because I was soon recommended as a first-rate child-minder. Hourly rates were discussed. Before I knew what was happening, I was being introduced to the very charming Alabaster C. Torrington, a young man of two years old.

I’m a child-minder now — I didn’t see that coming. He’ll be over every day for the rest of the summer since Mr. Torrington has a very time-consuming job, and the grandmother that used to watch him is in the hospital. I like children, make no mistake, but I have little experience with those that are just putting on their big-kid underpants. What’s more, the lad is magical and his parents appear to be Muggles.

You’ve watched over your younger cousins before, right? Is there anything you recommend?

Love,

Heri

H eri,

The public has been clambering for word on you for a fortnight already; they’re getting antsy that there hasn’t been any public sightings of you for a while. I’ve actually seen a few reporters scoping out the places you’ve been seen at before in hopes of getting an interview; one actually tried grilling me about what I knew. It’d be funny if it wasn’t so pathetic.
Father has asked me how you've been doing and has told me to tell you that he recommends extending your holiday as long as you can. I assume he means that you should arrive home the day before we have to catch the Express at the earliest and Floo directly onto the platform the day of. I'm rather inclined to agree with him; the corrupted factions are scrabbling for whatever footing they can sink their claws into, and I don't doubt there are some sensationalists of Skeeter's ilk that would love to throw the kneazles amongst the pixies with misconstrued quotes.

I trust you are maintaining a low key over there. Keep it that way.

— Zacharias

"Come on, Allie," Heri coaxed, crouched down, her hand held out to the little boy hiding under the bed. "The creature's gone now — it's safe to come out."

The trembling boy under the bed merely shook his head, curling himself further into the corner he had settled himself in.

Heri bit back a sigh and rocked back on her heels. This was turning out to be a Hell of a day. She should have known something like this would happen — after such a long stretch without having to battle anything, a monster attack was long overdue.

It had been nearly a week since Alabaster's father had started dropping off his son for the day — sometimes for the accompanying night as well — for Heri to look after. Alabaster was a good boy, a little prone to naughtiness, but he was lively without being obnoxious. He had been shy around her at first, but he soon warmed up when Heri proved herself to be a willing playmate. They had been having a grand time of it until today.

Sirius and Remus were out grocery shopping, and Dora had returned to England half a week ago. Heri had been in the kitchen, cutting up some cantaloupe for them to snack on, when some winged beast came crashing through the glass patio door. One look at its snarling, hungry face was enough for her to conclude that a polite request for it to leave would not be enough. Shifting her grip on the kitchen knife, she then ordered Ollie to take Alabaster and hide.

As Ollie plucked up the terrified toddler and bolted up the stairs, Heri had leaped at the monster, aiming for the wings. The beast was a scrappy thing, but it was no match for Heri. A few broken vases, scratched up sofas, and some rips in her blouse later, there was nothing left but dust and a couple of tail feathers.

Now all there was left to do was to soothe the scared child and tidy up the mess. The brownie they now employed discreetly took care of the tidying, but it was up to Heri to cajole Alabaster out of hiding.

Ollie came scurrying in with a sippy-cup filled with grape juice.

"Thank you, sweetheart," said Heri, petting Ollie on the head.

The bogle butted up into the hand, closing her eyes in delight.

"Will Alabaster come out to play now?" Ollie asked, blinking guileless brown eyes up at Heri. She tilted her head and pecked under the bed. "Playing in the dark is no fun."

"In a moment, pet," Heri replied, shifting so she now sat on her knees. She peered under again. "Come now, sweetheart, I wouldn't be here if the creature was still around. It's been taken care of and it won't be hurting anyone."
Alabaster sniffled, rubbing a fist to his eye.

"Monster hurt gwamma!" he sobbed. "Monster go'n' hurt me too!"

Heri stilled.

"It was . . ." Heri began. "Alabaster! You mean you've seen that thing before?"

"Hurt gwamma," he repeated, his shoulders shaking.

Heri sat back, landing heavily on her bum.

In her experience, an 'unendowed' person, magical or otherwise, either won't see the monsters — the ones that turn to dust upon destruction — at all, or would perceive it as something completely mundane instead. Ernie had told her that this was because of a thing called the Mist, a mystical influence created by Hecate to keep the divine hidden from everyday Muggles. For Alabaster to not only see it for what it truly was, but to have experienced it before as well . . .

Heri peered under the bed again, her eyes noticeably wider.

"Alabaster," she breathed, examining the boy with keener eyes. "Alabaster . . . it's fine now!" Her tone became much more earnest.

This poor boy! Seeing things no one else around him could see and not being old enough to do anything about them! And his family got hurt because of it! Heri didn't like the Dursleys in the least bit, but she still couldn't imagine the guilt she'd feel if one of the monsters that regularly came after her attacked them as well.

She looked at toddler sadly.

"I know the monsters can be very scary, dear. You must be so confused why no one else can see them. But I've dealt with them before! I know how to get rid of them before anyone can get hurt. It's safe to come out now."

Alabaster returned her wide-eyed look.

"You . . . you see 'em too?" he whispered, as if scared someone would overhear them.

"I do," Heri told him. "I have other friends that can see them as well. It's because of who our mummies and daddies are. When you get bigger, it won't be as scary any longer."

"I don' want 'em ta hurt me," Alabaster warbled, his eyes filling again.

"Oh, lovey," Heri cooed, extending her hand to him once more. "Nothing's going to hurt you when I'm around to protect you. You don't have to be scared when I'm here."

Sniffling once more, Alabaster finally crawled forward and took Heri's hand. He latched onto the appendage like it was a life-line as Heri hauled him out. Using the momentum, the little boy launched himself into Heri's lap, burrowing into her stomach and clutching at the front of her shirt.

Heri immediately wrapped her arms around the distraught child. One arm around his middle and the other hand gently rubbing his back, she rocked Alabaster as he cried out his fear, confusion, and relief.

When Ollie joined in on the hug by sidling up and smoothing down the boy's hair, Heri's heart squeezed with almost painful affection. A tingle similar to the ones she experienced when her battle
senses went off filled her, but instead of shooting through her limbs to fortify them, this remained in her chest, merely warming her.

As if sharing Heri's sentiment, the two children snuggled harder into her.

Had Heri been paying any attention to anything outside of the two in her arms, she would have noticed that she was glowing with divinity.

---

_Dear Ernie,_

_You were right about the monsters._

_I've found a baby godborn that's had some bird creature put his grandmother in the hospital. I've taken care of the bird creature, but I'm not sure what to do with Alabaster. He's only two and his father — very busy with work — spends too little time around Alabaster to hide the child's scent with his humanity. With Alabaster's grandmother effectively out of the picture and him now spending the majority of his time with me, I worry about what will happen to him when I leave at the end of the summer._

_I'm considering telling his father. Obviously, Mr. Torrington must be aware to some extent, but I'm not sure if he understands the danger his son is in. They live out amongst the Muggles — I'm not sure if you understand how much more likely one is to be attacked outside of magical areas, but I've had contact with monsters well before my tenth birthday, and I've encountered more creatures during the summers I used to spend with my muggle relatives than I have yet to do amongst wizards._

_It's not safe out here, Ernie, especially for someone as young as Alabaster. Please tell me there's a spell or something I can cast to . . ._

---

_Dear Potter,_

_Macmillan owl'd me about you needing an enchanted object that can hide us from monsters. Now, there's not much outside of a really foul Muggle that can hide the scent of an adolescent or older godborn, but the Carmichael family grimoire has instructions for enchanting a piece of jewellery that will work for a child less than twelve years old. It's best if it's never taken off, but . . ._

---

_Dear Heri,_

_Thank you for the chained wallet you sent me. It has to be the nicest gift I've ever received. At first, I was a bit confused as to why it came with a chain, but it's been of great help to me; I've yet to lose it since I've started using it. I usually have to have our house-elf, Corbin, find my wallet as I usually have trouble keeping track of it._

_Gran says she's impressed by the quality of leather and the workmanship, and it's very difficult to impress my Gran._

_Anyway, I hope you like my gift in return. I was thinking about getting you Henbane's Bestiary since you like C.O.M.C. so much, but I saw this in the shops when I was out picking up new pruning shears. I remembered you mentioning your interest in them before, so I thought you might like a crystal ball of your own._

_Hoping you are well,
ROUGE DEMENTORS ROAMING LONDON

By Live-Action Correspondent, Sulplice Quimbledorn

Terror and despair struck the hearts of wizards and Muggles alike yesterday afternoon when a trio of Azkaban's notorious guards descended upon the unsuspecting citizens of the London Borough of Islington going about their daily business. As the foul creatures bore down upon them, several Muggles in their automobiles succumbed to the dispiriting influence and crashed into one another, resulting in severe damage of both persons and vehicles.

Aurors on the scene were horrified and baffled . . .

Dear Heri,

Greenland is lovely. The ice is yummy.

We haven't spotted any Umbringulated Gorbevacs, but I've found that the Monster Book of Monsters does an admirable job of sniffing out hiding creatures. My copy (that I've named Grizwald) valiantly discovered and confronted a Troll of Nadroj before we could apparate away. He got a bit scuffed, but he's stronger for it.

Don't worry too much about your precious burden — your enchantment will hold. Also, his mother is one of the more attentive ones, so protection will come from that front as well.

With fond wishes,

Luna

P.S. Daddy says hello.

P.P.S. Grizwald says hello too, and that he'd like to formally court your copy. I don't speak much sentient-bookese, but I believe he's spoken at great lengths about her crisp cover and sharp pages.

— —

Heri blinked at the odd declaration in Luna's post-script. The Monster Books of Monsters were actually sentient enough to the point that they desired to reproduce as well? That was some smart spell-work. She wondered what level of proficiency one had to reach to be able to create such a feat.
She didn't know what to think about 'Grizwald' wanting to mate with her own Book, though. The other girl made it sound very formal, which implied that the Books had a level of intelligence comparable to Beings . . .

A thought suddenly occurred to her when she glanced up to see Alabaster down for a nap in the baby-cot she had found in the attic. Taking out a fresh sheet of parchment and a quill, Heri immediately began to pen a return letter to Luna.

—

Dear Luna,

I'm glad to hear that you're having a nice time, though I'm tempted to worry for you after an encounter with a Troll of Nadorj. You're being careful, right? Discovery is wonderful, but not at the price of your life and limbs.

As for matters of courting, I'm afraid my Book will be too pre-occupied in another matter to engage in such a thing. The distance between them will be another strike against it, you see, because I'll be leaving . . . Her? I'll be leaving her here . . .

—

Dear Miss Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been selected to serve as Prefect for Hufflepuff House. Your school record shows that you are willing to work hard, have exhibited the ability to lead others, and value fair play, which Hufflepuffs have long stood for.

We are certain that you will continue to be a model for your peers and will take your new responsibilities seriously. Enclosed, please find your prefect badge, which should be worn on your robes at all times. Congratulations!

Sincerely,

Pomona Sprout

Head of Hufflepuff House

Covered in monster dust and bruises, a blond boy with the twitchy shiftiness inherent to people that had seen some shit stood in a partially destroyed playground. Around him, the ground was splattered with blood and looked like some great beast had raked its claws over the terrain repeatedly. This description was spot on. Barely able to keep on his feet, the boy tilted dangerously to the side with exhaustion and despair when he had no choice but to accept that his sword had been corroded down to little more than useless sludge.

"Dear, dear . . ."

The blond boy's head snapped to the side at the sudden exclamation. Caught off guard, he swiveled around on the spot, holding up his melted sword in front of him. He was panting harshly and almost seeing double, not at all ready for another confrontation.

The person that had come up behind him held up a placating hand.
"Steady on there, we mean you no harm!"

His blitzing mind took a moment to catch up with what his eyes were seeing. Standing before him was an older girl, anywhere from eleven to fourteen for all he could tell, a cautiously friendly look on her pretty face. She looked to be a rich kid, dressed in a blue floral sundress, hair pinned up under a fancy looking sun hat, and white, elbow-length gloves. Hanging off her were two little kids, one being a girl around kindergarten age, the other looking like he was still using diapers.

They had been using the swings earlier, the boy thought inanely before everything went to hell and everyone else had run away screaming. His useless sword had not wavered from where he was holding it. He was in no state to be letting his guard down, not when he was down a weapon and literally anyone could be a monster in disguise.

He had been on the run for several months now. In that time, he had discovered that more monsters lived among the regular people than he had thought, and that every single one of those monsters were willing to toss aside their unassuming front at the drop of a hat just to get their claws in fresh demigod meat.

Just earlier that day, he had been trying to buy a box of doughnuts from a bakery with the money he had pickpocketed off a crotchety old businessman the evening before when a dude in a friggin' wheelchair tried to take a bite out of him. The resulting chase led to him zig-zagging across town and eventually laying waste to a really nice playground, likely scarring several kids and their parents for life.

Knowing what he did about the Mist, he wondered if he'd be featured on the local news as some Satanist juvenile delinquent that brutally murdered a disabled person. After what happened with that shoe-store employee that one time when he was still in Connecticut, he wouldn't be surprised.

"Alright then . . ." the girl said slowly, cautiously lowering the toddler from her hip and depositing him in the little girl's arms.

Once the transaction was completed, the younger girl automatically stepped behind the older girl and backed up a few steps. The little ankle-biter squirmed in agitation but made no protest.

The blond boy's conscience twinged at seeing the scared look on the little kids' faces, but he wasn't ready to lower his guard, not when he was still running on hyped up instincts and adrenaline.

The older girl's newly freed hand came up to join the first one in the placating gesture.

"There now," she said soothingly. He noted that her accent wasn't American. "We're all friends here. I didn't mean to startle you, mate."

"Wh-wha —" he tried to say, his jitters not helping at all. He flicked his head in irritation. "Who . . .?"

"I'm Heri," the girl said, her lips quirking in a wry smile. "Behind me is Ollie and Allie. I'd say it's nice to meet you, but you're pointing something that you just used to kill an acid-spitting monster at me. May I know the name of such a dangerous young man?"

He gaped at her. No monster ever—! So she— But no mortal he had met before—!

"Mm-mon-s-ter?" he stuttered, his brain all jumbled.

No monster called each other 'monster' — it was always proper names or species with them. It was as if they didn't realize that killing people on a whim and trying to eat them was horrific. The only
other person beside himself that he knew of that called them monsters was his mother—

"Are you a goddess?" he blurted out before he could even finish the thought.

She blinked at him, her hands faltering.

He blushed at how tactless his question was, but didn't take it back. There was an odd air about her, and he didn't know how else to phrase it.

"A goddess?" she echoed, blinking rapidly. "Not as far as I know. I don't need to be a goddess to see that you and that monster did a number on each other, though I suppose you came out the better."

She then tilted her head and frowned at him with a concerned look on her face.

"Do you need to sit down, dear? You look rather dizzy, and I don't like how much that cut on your arm is bleeding. Best to calm down your heart-rate."

Having concluded she was no monster despite whatever else she could be, the blond boy finally dropped his ruined sword, letting it fall to the ground. The older girl gently caught him by his shoulder and eased him down as well.

She clucked over the aforementioned cut, looking very unhappy indeed.

"Fetch me the first-aid kit from my bag, would you, lambkin?" she said to the younger girl. "In fact, bring the entire thing."

The little girl snapped to immediately, returning the toddler and dashing off.

"Have you never met another godborn before?" the Heri girl murmured as she held the sides of his gushing wound together to stem the bleeding. "Or perhaps you'd call us demigods. 'Goddess' isn't usually the reaction I get."

His blush returned. Oh. He hadn't considered that as a possibility.

"I didn't expect to run into another one, not so soon at least," he mumbled. "You don't even look like one."

"Oh?" she said, cocking her head again, gently prodding some bruises. "I didn't know we had a uniform. What is one supposed to look like then?"

"Well..." he hedged as the little girl returned. Heri immediately pulled out some bandages and creams. "Heroic looking, I guess. Like Hercules, you know? Swords and scars and stuff. I figured they'd be on the run like me."

Héri paused in what she was doing and looked up at him.

"You're on the run?" she asked very seriously. "Is it that bad over here? You look like you should still be in primary school."

He shrugged uncomfortably.

"Mom's not right in the head, so I figured it'd be better for the both of us if monsters didn't attack the house while trying to get to me. I don't have to worry about protecting her now either."

"... And how old are you?"
"I turn ten in a few months."

Heri didn't say anything in reply, she just pursed her lips and returned her attention to the aforementioned gushing wound.

"I think this is going to need stitches," she eventually said after wiping off some of the blood and stemming the flow with gauze. "The others will be fine in a few days, but this one's going to need some extra help."

She got up and brushed off the back of her dress. She held her hand out to him.

"I can sew you back together at my house. I doubt you'll be wanting to go to the hospital, so you'll have to make due with my sewing kit."

He let himself be hauled up by her and led out of the park. They walked pretty briskly, so he was surprised to see how well the younger girl was kept up. The toddler was back on Heri's hip, of course.

"You never mentioned your name," Heri said as she led him up the walkway of a house of a kind he had only ever seen on TV before.

"Oh, right," he replied, awkwardly following behind her. "I'm Luke Castellan."

Dear Fisken,

Thank you for all your hard work. It's a relief to know that Bramblewood Hall will be in good hands while I'm away. You are, of course, to see to the house however you see fit, but I have one small request should it not inconvenience you too much: please allow entrance to Alabaster and Luke should they ever come seeking a place to stay, especially Luke. I worry about them so, and I want it so they have at least one place in the world where they don't have to constantly fear for their lives. If you would be so good as to feed them as well, my heart would rest easier knowing that they are in good hands.

the

DAILY PROPHET

* Wizarding Britain's Premier News Source *

(September 2nd, 1995)

HERI POTTER RETURNS!

By On-site Reporter, Fatima Petrova

After a three-month hiatus in which none of the public had seen or heard rumour of her, Miss Potter returns to us in just enough time to board the Hogwarts Express. This reporter had been present, dropping off her own child, when Miss Potter arrived via her guardian's Apparition. The outcry of those in witness was massive.

Miss Potter, if you recall, was recently abducted by a former You-Know-Know follower,
eventually resulting in outrage at the questionable competence of the current administration . . .

---

To Whom it May Concern:

Miss Potter has been diagnosed with a variation of narcolepsy. She is currently taking Wideye Potion and Pöttiger's Perking Nostrum for this condition. I request that whoever is in charge of students' health maintain her medication schedule: One dose each of Wideye and Pöttiger's at every standard mealtime. It is also encouraged that she take several short naps (10-15 minutes) daily to prevent undue sleepiness.

However, even with the medication, Miss Potter's condition remains chronic. She suffers from sudden collapse during periods of low-activity, so a companion has been assigned to accompany her to prevent damage to her person during an attack. If an attack happens within the presence of others, it's best for them to not crowd around when her companion wakes her, as that leads to disorientation and potentially violent over-reaction when she regains consciousness. A dose of her medication is recommended if she remains drowsy after an attack.

Miss Potter has inquired about extracurricular exercise and whether she will be able to continue participating in school Quidditch games. As she has yet to have any collapses during high-activity periods, I approve of her continued participation, provided that she takes a dose of her medication before the game, just to be safe.

Thank you for your cooperation in these matters.

Yours faithfully,

Healer Calpurnia Gosling

General Practitioner

Member of the National Health Conglomerate

St. Marciana's Medical Center, Salem, MA

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Dear Sirius,

I've decided it's time to stop wondering if strange things will ever stop happening to me. The answer to that is no, they will not. It's time to throw in the towel, because it's just something I doubt I'll ever outgrow at this rate.

I've accidentally eaten Professor Binns. Or maybe a better word for it would be 'inhaled'. No one is more baffled by it than myself. I was just yawning, and then suddenly I breathed him in like a cloud of smoke. He even tasted like barbecue charcoal.

You should have seen the look on Hermione's face, one would have thought I was the Antichrist.

Thankfully, he was no longer a living thing, so it doesn't count as killing, and thus I can't be punished for it, but now the rest of the ghost are looking at me like I'm the light at the end of the tunnel they ran away from. Myrtle actually burst into tears at the sight of me, and it took several romance novels to calm her down again.
Unprecedented spiritual powers aside, we now lack a history professor.

Send help.

— Heri

Dear Headmaster Dumbledore,

In light of the new History of Magic professor, I must inform you that I will be self-studying in said subject for the rest of this school year at the very least. While Professor Umbridge has a unique outlook in her course aims and teaching methods, I'm afraid they don't suit my needs in the slightest. I plan to take my O.W.L.s and eventually my N.E.W.T.s on the subject, and Professor Umbridge has already revealed to us that she doesn't plan to include many parts of history that will be included in those examinations.

I apologise if this is rather sudden, but I'd rather not waste either of our times by lingering in the class and eventually making more work for everyone involved by dragging it out.

Hoping this letter finds you in good health,

Heri Potter

5th-year Hufflepuff Prefect

Dumbledore read over the very politely put-together note once again and shook his head wryly. Only Heri Potter would send a letter in advanced to her professors to inform them that she was boycotting a class in protest of the instructor. For all that she was such a retiring girl, she certainly didn't put up with much. She was a bit like her mother in that respect.

The headmaster sighed when he realised that there would now be a drove of students refusing to attend History of Magic. Sometimes it was quite troublesome how the other students were so eager to follow the Potter girl's lead.

the

DAILY PROPHET

* Wizarding Britain's Premier News Source *

(January 14nd, 1996)

MASS OUTBREAK FROM AZKABAN! YOU-KNOW-WHO RETURNS?

By Live-Action Correspondent, Sulplice Quimbledorn

Late last evening, a handful of bedraggled and singed prison guards stumbled into the Aurors' Office, shouting that ten prisoners had escaped. Their accounts of the breakout go from shocking to horrifying as they related that several dementors had turned on them as well. (See 3rd page for more
on the last account of rouge dementors) One man was a trembling mess when he recounted that the escapees had been rejoicing loudly, praising their 'lord' for coming to rescue them.

Minister Fudge had this to say . . .

---

Dear Luke,

I hope Hedwig has found you in good health still and that neither of you attacked the other upon meeting. I assume you can see her four legs and general terrifyingness as well? Rest assured, claw-scratches aside, I would not send her if I thought she would try to eat you. I suppose she is technically a 'monster,' but she has never shown any aggression towards demigods beyond what she shows for any other person. Please feed her a stray animal to temper any aggression she might show.

It was my hope that you would regard my house as a sort of safehouse and stay there a while longer, but I would understand if you didn't. Feel free to return at any point, I've instructed my 'invisible servants' as you call them to care for you if you ever come back. I only request that you keep the enclosed ring on you at all times.

You're nearly too old for it, but the ring should hide your scent from monsters while you wear it. I've made a similar trinket for Allie, so you don't have to worry about him if you're not in the area. It's meant for children under the age of twelve, so I hope you get as much use out of it as you can while you still can. Please stay safe.

Love,

Heri

Chapter End Notes

If you're curious about bogles, they are actual mythical creatures. The description of them in this story is purely my own making though. They're actually similar to boggarts, but I couldn't find any description of them that made them solely unique. Since I needed another hob-like creature, the bogle works rather well.

* A Troll of Nadorj is a canonical Harry Potter creature. It was mentioned in the Monster Book of Monsters during the 3rd film.
The Power the Dark Lord Knows Not pt. 1

Chapter Notes

One of the "typos" I had to fix in this chapter was one I didn't realize was a typo before rereading a few times and then googling it. "Was sat" is grammatically incorrect in all variations of English, but it didn't occur to me because . . . well, because I use it in everyday conversation and have heard people say it as well.

But should it truly be considered a "typo"? Yes, it's incorrect, but it's a dialect quirk. "Was sat" is apparently common in northern British English, and I (a southern USer) use it as a part of my vernacular as well. "Ain't" is definitely incorrect, but I've never gotten comments about going back to remove it from my writing. I don't want to start an argument or anything, 'cause it's nothing to get fussed about, but I was wondering what you thought of such dialect quirks being used in writing. Not just in dialogue but in the narration as well.

It was an inescapable fact that no good news came from a late-night caller during times of civil unrest. Equally as inescapable was the fact that Number 12 Grimmauld Place had been playing host to several of those late-night callers for quite some time now, nearly a year now to be exact. Whether in the form of a hodgepodge crowd arriving to pool whatever information they had gleaned covertly, or shifty messengers checking in under the cover of the dead of night, the inhabitants of Number 12 had become quite used to the cloak-and-dagger routine and the inevitable solemnity that came with it. The Order of the Phoenix, for all its good intentions, was still undeniably a vigilante group.

The first iteration of these clandestine occurrences happened the night that the current residents had returned from their holiday overseas. It turned out that Sirius and Remus had been keeping contact with other members of the Order since the reinstatement of the group at the end of Heri's fourth year at school. When word was sent out that they were returning to England, it was decided that a proper meeting with all the current members in attendance was in order. Since then, Number 12 had become the official headquarters of the Order, the Black Family wards on top of a Fidelius Charm being absolutely nothing to scoff at.

Heri had remained distanced from the goings-on since her return home after fifth-year, partly because the Order members didn't feel right about having an under-age witch involved, no matter who she was, and partly because Heri herself had no interest in joining in. She respected the importance of what they were doing, but she couldn't think of any benefit for anyone for her to even just sit in on meetings. Sirius and Remus already told her about things like Death Eater activities, anything more would just be redundant since she couldn't contribute in any espionage anyway.

Since the traffic through the lower floors of the house had increased, another fireplace had been installed up on the third floor for Heri and her friends to use. The entirety of the third floor had more or less been gifted to Heri when she had arrived, so the floo address was 'Number 12 1/5, Potter Residence'.

The aforementioned floo had been put to good use as of late because word had gotten to them (via Professor Snape's report at a meeting) that Voldemort had indeed gotten himself re-embodied
somehow through nefarious means, so Heri's two guardians had become exceedingly reluctant to allow her outside of the protection of the wards. This resulted in numerous slumber-parties, many that included the boys as well when Zacharias' and Ernie's parents (who held Ministry positions) wanted their boys somewhere extra safe while they were away on business.

Truthfully, remaining within the premises of Number 12 for the majority of the summer holiday wasn't much of a trial, not for Heri at least. She had spent her formative years being locked away when not at school or doing chores, so being free to even just wander the house was still pretty novel. And now she had Sirius and Remus, a personal attendant in the form of Oleander, and a veritable menagerie of semi-sentient experiments; she required no further stimulation. Her various hobbies were indoorsy anyway, so it wasn't like she was craving the fresh air. If left to her own devices, she would have been perfectly happy, but the thing about having friends was that you had to maintain them as well.

Now, 'maintaining' her friends wouldn't have been such a bother if it wasn't for the fact that they insisted on making a bother of themselves. The open invitation extended to come by whenever they wanted added together with their inborn crowding tendencies resulted in them taking up the majority of her waking hours, taking her away from her personal projects. She enjoyed having friends, but . . .

Damn their need to crowd! Was it so difficult to stop acting like bleating herbivores and just exist independently every once in a while?

This was the first summer that she had spent so much time with her school friends, and, dear gods, it was nearly as grating as dealing with the Dursleys! Granted, none of them were wishing her dead or trying to bully her, but on top of being required to provide interesting conversation and fun in any form, she was expected to keep the peace while not being allowed to fall back on her old standby method of dealing with the Dursleys: intimidation and physical injury. She knew wishing for such a thing likely meant she was damaged in the head, but performing an old fashion beat down was so much easier than using people skills.

Though they tried to hide it, there was a tension surrounding her friends these days, a fidgety atmosphere that had been amping up since the break-out from Azkaban had happened. They had been sniping at each other more than usual, the taunts they exchanged coming with more bite. Sarcastic banter was par on course for Hannah and Zacharias, but even the ever 'too-cool' and passive-aggressive Sally-Anne was getting in her shots. Heri had never spent so much time mediating for their clashing personalities in all the time that she'd known them. When it wasn't Zacharias and Megan having a go at each other, it was Wayne seething from some backhanded compliment Sally-Anne gave ever so idly.

Heri tried to be understanding, but it was difficult enough to not join in their growling without having to empathise with them as well. She had never been one that gained any sort of satisfaction or relief from being beastly to others — she'd rather beat shite up — but it seemed every one of her usual crowd took some bit of delight of getting one over others, even Ernie, the who usually helped her to keep heads from being bitten off. If the bickering wasn't ridiculous enough already, Ernie had gotten into a silent grudge-match with Hannah when Heri wasn't looking, and now she was alone in reigning in her onerous bunch.

If wasn't one thing, it was another.

Heri had already known that her friends didn't deal well with the uncertainty of a situation that they couldn't do anything about — second- and third-year had proven that — but she hadn't expected them to start taking it out on each other. It had gotten to the point that Heri had developed
the habit of crocheting — an activity that required prolonged immediate attention — so she wouldn't start ripping into them from sheer irritation. The habit soon became something of a tic, and she was now averaging three to four completed projects a week.

She was not their mother, Heri told herself as she busied her hands. She was their friend, and it was not her place to scold them as if she had any right to tell them what to do. How could she expect them to respect her rights if she didn't respect theirs? This was what she constantly reminded herself to keep her self in check. She knew full well what her temper was like, and it wouldn't do anyone any favours if she blew up and rained down a hellish fury like she used to do when she was younger.

Now, if only her friends would do her the courtesy of doing similarly. Heri knew that friendships could become strained as people grew up — she had observed other students at school enough to know that — but the in-fighting wasn't so much drifting apart as it was self-destructing. She liked to think that this was just a phase brought on by hormones and stress that they would eventually get past, but she couldn't help but be reminded that they had always been more her friends than they were each other's. Either way, she was getting mightily fed up, and sixth-year hadn't even started yet.

It was in this agitated state of mind that Remus called Heri away from the other girls as they were preparing for bed. It wasn't even nine yet, but they wanted to get an early start for tomorrow's outing to beat the before-school rush. Remus came knocking as they were just finishing up their pre-bedtime rituals.

Judging from the pinched, almost resigned look on his face when Heri opened her door, it was going to be another one of their late-night callers. But who could it be that Heri's presence was required?

She pulled on a sleeping robe over her nightgown and followed Remus down the stairs.

Walking down to the dining room where Order meetings took place, Heri saw that their late guest was none other than Headmaster Dumbledore. A cup of tea in front of him, he sat next to Sirius, looking quite a bit more tired than she had ever seen him.

Heri didn't know Professor Dumbledore personally very well. She had spoken to him a few times in passing, whether at school or during downtime before Order meetings, but she couldn't say they were much more than acquainted. If asked, she would say that she knew Professor Snape more intimately, and the dour man usually ignored her altogether when he wasn't sending her fellow Hufflepuffs skittering to hide behind her in the face of his harsh berating or getting into an argument with Sirius about his suitability of taking care of anyone, let alone her. The Headmaster seemed kind enough, but Heri hadn't felt any desire so far to get to know him outside of a professional setting.

When Professor Dumbledore noticed her as she entered the room, he gave her a worn but fond smile. It wasn't much more than a slight upturn of his lips, but that was easily excused seeing as he looked weary enough that she suspected he hadn't slept in a few days.

"Hello, my dear," said the Headmaster, straightening up and lifting his cup to take a sip.

Heri bobbed in an abbreviated curtsy. So long had she been under Auntie Andromeda's tutelage that such gestures were now habitual instead of stilted like they had been in the beginning.

"Good evening, Professor," Heri said. "I hope you're well?"

He lowered his cup with a quiet sigh and smiled ruefully.

"Perhaps not at my best at the moment," he admitted, "but not nearly as bad as I look, I assure
you. And yourself?"

"With all things considered, as well as I can be, sir."

"What is this about, Professor?" asked Sirius before they could continue with their pleasantries, a frown on his face. "You've never asked to see Heri before."

Professor Dumbledore's demeanour then became withdrawn. He looked grimmer than a newly widowed elderly woman at her husband's funeral. He placed his cup back in its saucer with a tiny *clink* and drew in a fortifying breath.

"You may want to take a seat for this. I believe this will take some time to explain," the Headmaster said, interlacing his fingers on the table.

As Heri and Remus sat down, cups of tea appeared on the table for them as well. Remus took her hand under the table and gave it a comforting squeeze.

"Before I begin, I must ask you, Miss Potter, what do you know of prophecies?"

If the clues leading up hadn't been enough, this was when Heri knew beyond a doubt that she would not be liking what she would be told. Heri responded in the way she would had this been a school setting and she had just been posed a question in class.

"The textbook definition of prophecy implies a process in which one or more messages are communicated through two specific types of seers, either an oracle or a prophet," said Heri, her tone courteous but bland. "The messages typically involve 'divine inspiration, interpretation, or revelation' of events to come. Historically, clairvoyance and precognition have been thought to be synonymous with prophecy, but *true* prophecy involves being the mouthpiece of a higher power, the word coming from the Greek 'prophetia,' meaning 'a gift of interpreting the will of God.'

"Higher powers send prophecies either when their vessels have been asked for one, or in times of war and change, when a great body of people — possibly under their jurisdiction — will be influenced. These prophecies can be things like warnings of how a change might come about, or even a message to bring hope, foretelling that a favourable end is nearing.

"Being gifted with prophecy doesn't necessarily go hand-in-hand with skill with divination though. Higher powers choose their messengers through personal preferences, not because of any merit or capabilities. It is because of this that being an oracle or prophet is not recognised by any official agency as a true qualification for positions that call for divinatory skills, much like how metamorphmagery doesn't guarantee a position within the covert operations of the DMLE."

Professor Dumbledore blinked slowly, nonplussed. His lips then twitched despite his solemnity.

"A deeper understanding of it than I was expecting, admittedly," he said.

Heri quirked a small smile of satisfaction despite herself. Because Hogwarts taught beyond the standard O.W.L. education, the students that continued on to their N.E.W.T.s were acknowledged by the guilds as Apprentices under their professors, who were all Masters within their fields. This held true even if said students didn't continue on the road toward Mastery after graduation, those type technically staying Apprentices for the rest of their lives. For a girl that had spent her early years being put down and told constantly that she would never have any prospects for a good future, it was an opportunity easy to take advantage of.

"Thank you, sir. I hope to gain Masteries in as many fields as I can, divination being amongst my top choices. I plan on applying for Journeyman accreditation at the Divinus Haruspex Association of
Inexplicably, Professor Dumbledore winced at her statement, the bit of amusement that had been apparent drained away.

"Sir?" said Heri, voice hesitant.

"It pains me that students must now plan their future around the rising darkness," Professor Dumbledore said eventually. "I think of the bright opportunities, and inevitably Voldemort's taint casts its shadow. I feel it more strongly with you, Miss Potter, you who bear the burden of his mark with you no matter where you go.

"I made guesses, fifteen years ago, when I saw the scar upon your forehead, what it might mean. I guessed that it might be the sign of a connection forged between you and Voldemort. It became apparent, shortly after you rejoined the magical world, that I was correct, and that your scar was giving you warnings when Voldemort was close to you, or else feeling powerful emotion."

"I know this, sir," said Heri warily. She didn't like thinking back to the time she had no choice but to take a human life. The pain in her head that she now knew came from proximity to Voldemort was beyond any she had ever known before.

"And this ability of yours — to detect Voldemort's presence, even when he is disguised, and to know what he is feeling when his emotions are roused — has become more and more pronounced since Voldemort returned to his own body and his full powers."

Heri only nodded, not looking at Sirius or Remus as they sent increasingly concerned expressions toward her.

Professor Dumbledore stared into his tea cup as if he was checking for omens, then he looked back at Heri and said, "Five years ago you arrived at Hogwarts, safe and whole as I had planned and intended. Well — not quite whole. You had suffered. I could see that despite how well you were getting along. I knew you would when I left you on your aunt and uncle's doorstep. I knew I was condemning you to ten dark and difficult years."

He paused. Heri said nothing.

"You might ask — and with good reason — why it had to be so. Why could some wizarding family not have taken you in? Many would have done so more than gladly, would have been honoured and delighted to raise you as their own child.

"My answer is that my priority was to keep you alive. With Sirius and this house not an option, you were in more danger than perhaps anyone realised. Voldemort had been vanquished hours before, but his supporters — and many of them are almost as vicious as he — were still at large, angry, desperate, and violent. And I had to make my decision too with regard to the years ahead. Did I believe that Voldemort was gone forever? No. I knew not whether it would be ten, twenty, or fifty years before he returned, but I was sure he would do so, and I was sure too, knowing him as I have done, that he would not rest until he killed you.

"I knew that Voldemort's knowledge of magic is perhaps more extensive than any wizard alive. I knew that even my most complex and powerful protective spells and charms were unlikely to be invincible if he ever returned to full power.

"But I knew too where Voldemort was weak. And so I made my decision. You would be protected by an ancient magic of which he knows, which he despises, and which he has always
underestimated — to his cost. I am speaking, of course, of the fact that your mother died to save you. She gave you a lingering protection he never expected, a protection that flows in your veins to this day. I put my trust, therefore, in your mother's blood. I delivered you to her sister, her only remaining relative."

"She doesn't love me at all, sir," said Heri at once. "She's never cared beyond how the neighbours—"

"But she took you," Professor Dumbledore cut across her. "She may have taken you grudgingly, furiously, unwillingly, bitterly, yet still she took you, and in doing so, she sealed the enchantment I placed upon you. Your mother's sacrifice made the bond of blood the strongest shield I could give you."

"I still don't—"

"While you could still call home the place where your mother's blood dwelt, there you couldn't be touched or harmed by Voldemort. He shed her blood, but it lives on in you and her sister. Her blood became your refuge. You needed return there only once a year, but as long as you still called it home, there he couldn't hurt you. Your aunt knew this. I explained what I had done in the letter I left, with you, on her doorstep. She knew that allowing you to live there may well have kept you alive for all the years you were there."

"Five years ago, then, you arrived at Hogwarts, neither as happy nor as well-nourished as I would have liked, yet alive and stable. You were as normal a child as I could have hoped under the circumstances. Thus far, my plan was working well.

"And then . . . well, you will surely remember the events of your first year at Hogwarts quite as clearly as I do. You rose magnificently to the challenge that faced you, and sooner — much sooner — than I had anticipated, you found yourself face-to-face with Voldemort. You survived again. You did even more than that, you delayed his return to full power and strength. You fought a soldier's fight and came back unconquered. I was . . . prouder of you than I can say."

"Yet there was a flaw in this wonderful plan of mine," said Professor Dumbledore. "An obvious flaw that I knew, even then, might be the undoing of it all. And yet, knowing how important it was that my plan should succeed, I told myself that I would not permit this flaw to ruin it. I could prevent this, so I must be strong. And here was my first test, as you lay in the Hospital Wing, weak from your struggle with Voldemort."

"Sir?" said Heri, confused. She had been told that the Headmaster had brought her to the Hospital Wing that time, but he had not been there when she woke up. "I don't understand what you're saying."

"Would you not have asked me then why Voldemort had tried to kill you when you were a baby?"

Heri considered this for a moment before she nodded. She had been told that Professor Dumbledore was a leader of the forces that fought against Voldemort during the war. She would have realised very quickly, if had she seen him then, that he would have at least some inkling of why Voldemort wanted her dead.

"And ought I to have told you then?"

Heri stared into his blue eyes and said nothing. Her emotional part said that she should have been told whatever this great truth was as soon as possible because it was her right to know, but her
rational mind knew that it would have only hindered her at that age for something as heavy as the
headmaster was implying to hang over her, especially if there was nothing she could do about it.

"You do not see the flaw in the plan yet? No . . . perhaps not. Well, as you know, I decided not to
tell you. Eleven, I told myself, was much too young to know. I had never intended to tell you when
you were eleven. The knowledge would be too much at such a young age.

"I should have recognised the danger signs then. I should have asked myself why I did not feel
more disturbed that you might already want to ask the terrible question to which I knew, one day, I
must give a terrible answer. I should have recognised that I was too happy to think that I did not have
to do it on that particular day . . . You were too young, much too young.

"And so we entered your second year at Hogwarts. And once again you met challenges even
grown wizards have never faced. Once again you acquitted yourself beyond my wildest dreams.
You did not ask me then either, why Voldemort had left that mark upon you. We discussed your scar
and ability to speak Parseltongue, oh, yes . . . We came very, very close to the subject. Why did I not
tell you everything?

"Well, it seemed to me that twelve was, after all, hardly better than eleven to receive such
information. I allowed you to leave my presence, bloodstained, exhausted but exhilarated, and if I felt
a twinge of unease that I ought, perhaps, have told you then, it was swiftly silenced. You were still
so young, you see, and I could not find it in me to spoil that night of triumph . . .

"Do you see, my dear? Do you see the flaw in my brilliant plan now? I had fallen into the trap I
had foreseen, that I had told myself I could avoid, that I must avoid."

Heri’s brow crinkled.

"I don’t . . ."

"I cared about you too much," said Professor Dumbledore simply. "I cared more for your
happiness than your knowing the truth, more for your peace of mind than my plan, more for your life
than the lives that might be lost if the plan failed. In other words, I acted exactly as Voldemort
expects we fools who love to act.

"Is there a defence? I defy anyone who has watched you as I have — and I have watched you
more closely than you can have imagined — not to want to save you more pain than you had already
suffered. What did I care if numbers of nameless and faceless people and creatures were slaughtered
in the vague future if in the here and now you were alive, and well, and happy? I never dreamed that
I would have such a person on my hands.

"We entered your third year. I watched from afar as you struggled to repel Dementors, as you
found Sirius, learned what he was, and rescued him. Was I to tell you then, at the moment when you
had triumphantly snatched your godfather from the jaws of the Ministry? But now, at the age of
thirteen, my excuses were running out. Young you might be, but you had proved you were
exceptional. My conscience was uneasy, Miss Potter. I knew the time was coming.

"But then you disappeared from the maze in your fourth year and I believed I had waited too
long, that instead of protecting you, I had led to your downfall . . . yet still I did not tell you when
you were found again. There was no time; the protection surrounding the school had to be looked to
and then you were off to America.

"And now, tonight, I know you have long been ready for the knowledge I have kept from you for
so long, because you have proved that I should have placed the burden upon you before this, that
you have been capable for longer than I originally thought. My only defence is this: I have watched you struggling under more burdens than any student who has ever passed through this school, and I could not bring myself to add another — the greatest one of all."

Heri waited, but the Headmaster did not speak.

"Sir?"

"Voldemort tried to kill you when you were no more than a baby because of a prophecy made shortly before your birth. He knew the prophecy had been made, though he did not know its full contents. He set out to kill you when you were still a baby, believing he was fulfilling the terms of the prophecy. He discovered, to his cost, that he was mistaken, when the curse intended to kill you backfired. And so, since his return to his body, he has been determined to hear that prophecy in its entirety. This is the weapon he has been seeking so assiduously since his return: the knowledge of how to destroy you.

"On a cold, wet night sixteen years ago, in a room above the bar at the Hog’s Head Inn, I had gone there to see an applicant for the post of Divination teacher. She had travelled rather far to apply and was boarding there. The applicant was the great-great-granddaughter of a very famous, very gifted seer, and I thought it common politeness to meet her. I was disappointed. It seemed to me that she had not a trace of the gift herself. I told her, courteously I hope, that I did not think she would be suitable for the post.

"And then I turned to leave."

Professor Dumbledore got to his feet and fetched a shallow stone basin, carved with Saxon runes around the edges, from the far end of the table that Heri had not noticed before.

"A Pensieve," he told her when he saw her curious look. "One for the use of the Headmaster of Hogwarts. During these times, it has found new use in aiding the Order in analysing information."

He walked back to where he had been sitting, placed the Pensieve upon it, and raised his wand to his temple. From it, he withdrew silvery, gossamer-fine strands of thought clinging to the wand, and deposited them in the basin.

He sat back down and watched his thoughts swirl and drift inside the Pensieve for a moment. Then, with a sigh, he raised his wand and prodded the silvery substance with its tip.

A figure rose out of it, draped in shawls, her eyes magnified to enormous size behind her glasses, and she revolved slowly, her feet in the basin. When Professor Trelawney spoke, it was not in her usual ethereal, mystic voice, but in harsh, hoarse tones that would better suit a mummified revenant climbing out of a sarcophagus.

"THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES,
BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES.
AND THE DARK LORD WILL MARK THEM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT THEY WILL HAVE POWER
THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT.
AND THE DARK LORD WILL BRAND THEM AS HIS ENEMY, BUT THEY WILL HAVE
POWER THE DARK LORD CAN NEVER WIELD.
AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER, FOR NEITHER CAN TRIUMPH
WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES.

THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD WILL BE BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES . . ."

The slowly revolving Professor Trelawney sank back into the silver mass below and vanished.

"I didn't know Professor Trelawney was a prophet," Heri remarked inanely.

The following silence within the dining room was absolute.

"Professor Dumbledore?" Sirius said very quietly when the white-haired headmaster, still staring at the Pensieve, seemed completely lost in thought. "It . . . did that mean . . . What did that mean?"

"It meant," said Professor Dumbledore, "that the person who has the only chance of conquering Lord Voldemort for good was born at the end of July, nearly sixteen years ago. This child would be born to parents who had already defied Voldemort three times."

"Hang on a tick!" Sirius protested. "It can't be that straight forward! I thought divination was all double meanings and interpreting symbols! How do we even know which calendar we're supposed to be using?"

"Prophesying doesn't actually have much of a basis in practical divination," Heri told Sirius absently, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "Divination involves . . . using your own power to actively seek knowledge not of the immediate present . . . whether from a different point in time or from a far-off location, so the clarity of the information you receive depends entirely on personal skill. Prophecies, on the other hand, are . . . direct messages from a higher power through the mouth of their chosen vessels; they may be confusing when they're out of context, but there's no ambiguity in the meaning of the words themselves."

"As for the timing, the calendar of a prophecy depends entirely on the prophet and what they regard as standard. Since Professor Trelawney is a part of modern Western civilisation, her prophecies run on the Gregorian calendar, the current international standard."

Heri felt as though something was closing in upon her.

"But . . . me? Really?"

Professor Dumbledore surveyed her for a moment through his glasses.

"The odd thing is, Miss Potter," he said softly, "that it may not have meant you at all. Sibyll's prophecy could have applied to two children as far as we knew, both born at the end of July that year, both of whom had parents in the Order of the Phoenix, both sets of parents having narrowly escaped Voldemort three times. One, of course, was you. The other was Neville Longbottom."

Neville?

Heri didn't know what mystified her more, that there was a prophecy that claimed she was destined to take on a Dark Lord the world over was terrified of or that the other known candidate for the position was Neville Longbottom. Bless him, he had a lot of potential, but she didn't think he had it in him to kill anyone, never mind Voldemort.

"But then . . . " Heri started, "but then why do you think the prophecy is referring to me and not Neville?"
"The Department of Mysteries has a hall dedicated to the records of prophecies made within the jurisdiction of the nation of Britain. The official record originally had no name down for the subject of the prophecy, but was relabelled after Voldemort's attack on you as a child," said Professor Dumbledore. "It seemed plain to the keeper of the Hall of Prophecy that Voldemort could only have tried to kill you because he knew you to be the one to whom Sibyll was referring."

"Then — it might not be Heri?" said Sirius, looking hopeful.

"I am afraid," said Professor Dumbledore slowly, looking as though every word cost him a great effort, "that there is no doubt that it is Miss Potter."

"But you said — the Longbottom boy was born at the end of July too — and Frank and Alice—"

"Sirius!" Heri cried, protest written all over her face. "You can't be wishing such a thing on another person! Neville's just a boy! What on earth could he do against Voldemort?"

"And you are just a girl!" Sirius shot back. "If it can be about someone else . . . well, you can be certain I'll be rooting for that option!"

Professor Dumbledore interrupted with, "You are forgetting the next part of the prophecy, the identification of the child who could vanquish Voldemort. . . . Voldemort himself would 'mark them as his equal' and 'brand them as his enemy.' And so he did. He chose Miss Potter, not Mr. Longbottom, for both his original attack, giving her the scar that has proved both blessing and curse, and for his attempt at a rebirthing ritual, which called for 'blood of the enemy.'"

"But he might have chosen wrong!" Sirius protested, thumping the table with his fist. "He might have picked the wrong person!"

"He chose the child he thought most likely to be a danger to him. And notice this, Miss Potter," Professor Dumbledore said, returning his attention to Heri. "He chose not the pure-blood — which, according to his creed, is the only kind of wizard worth being or knowing — but the half-blood, like himself. He saw himself in you before he had ever seen you, and in marking you with that scar, he did not kill you, as he intended, but gave you powers, and a future, which have fitted you to escape him not once, but four times so far — something that neither your parents, nor Mr. Longbottom's parents, ever achieved."

"But why did he do it?" asked Heri, an uncomfortable chill in her gut. "Why did he try to kill me as a baby? It would have made more sense if he waited to see whether Neville or I looked more dangerous when we were older and tried to kill whoever it was then —"

"That might, indeed, have been the more practical course," said Professor Dumbledore, "except that Voldemort's information about the prophecy was incomplete. The Hog's Head Inn, which Sibyll chose for its cheapness, has long attracted, shall we say, a more interesting clientèle than the Three Broomsticks. It is a place where it is never safe to assume you are not being overheard. Of course, I had not dreamed, when I set out to meet Sibyll Trelawney, that I would hear anything worth overhearing. My — our — one stroke of good fortune was that the eavesdropper was detected only a short way into the prophecy and thrown from the building."

"So they only heard . . .?"

"He heard only the first part, the part foretelling the birth of a child in July to parents who had thrice defied Voldemort. Consequently, he could not warn his master that to attack you would be to risk transferring power to you — again marking you as his equal. So Voldemort never knew that there might be danger in attacking you, that it might be wise to wait or to learn more. He did not
"But I'm not even a sixth-year yet!" said Heri, utterly baffled. "He's decades older than me with just as much more experience with magic! I've only done so well so far because I got the jump on him and managed to smack him around a bit! Never mind that he wasn't ever in a proper body at the times. What power could —? And the end of the prophecy: 'neither can triumph —'"

" — while the other survives," Professor Dumbledore finished.

"So . . ." said Heri slowly, unsure what to think, "so that means that . . . I'm somehow stopping him from . . . winning his war . . . so no one can stop him from trying to kill me, and to take over . . . except for me?"

"Yes," said the headmaster, apologies written all over his face.

Heri scooted further into her seat and slumped back numbly. She sucked a deep breath in through her nose. Damn it all if this wasn't even worse than she had anticipated.

The four sat in silence as they thought. The ticking of the clock was the only sound that was being made, outside of their breathing.

At last, Heri sat straight once again and gave the headmaster a fierce look. One that startled him if the look on his face was anything to go by.

"So," she said sharply, no gentleness left in her tone, "how are we doing this?"

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What not many people realised was that Remus Lupin was actually a coward. He had been since even before he was bitten by Fenrir Greyback when he had been just shy of five years old. He chalked it up as a product of his father being a specialist on Non-Human Spiritous Apparitions, things that terrified the average adult never mind small children, and growing up during You-Know-Who's ascent to power. There was likely some natural disposition problems thrown into the mix as well. He grew up knowing very well that unimaginable horrors were out there in the big bad world and that he himself was very small.

When no less a person than Headmaster Dumbledore himself had come to offer him a place at Hogwarts, Remus had been equally excited and frightened. He would get to learn magic amongst the nation's very finest and most powerful! Oh, but he turned into a savage beast every month and could very easily hurt someone. He might finally have friends and other children around to talk to! But he didn't know how to talk to others and they might be able to tell something was wrong with him.

Meeting James and Sirius after he had been Sorted into Gryffindor was a delight Remus had not thought possible. He was already shocked by his Sorting — a Gryffindor? Surely not! He was so certain it would be Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff — but coming face to face with two cheerful and confident boys who truly embodied the House characteristics that also wanted to be his friends was something that still had him disbelieving well into his adulthood.

Friends! He had made friends! Oh, but why did they want to be friends with Remus? He was timid while they were bold; he was quiet while they were loud; he wasn't at all like them, so what did they see in him that they thought was worthwhile? The only thing he could think he could offer was homework help, and they did well in academics by themselves. Yet, wonders upon wonders, they stuck with him.

Friendship was a bliss that nothing since could measure up to.
Remus' greatest regret when thinking back on those times was the split second it took for him to
declare to befriend Peter Pettigrew.

That was the crux of it all, the mistake that would gnaw at him until the end of his days. It
was Remus that extended the hand of friendship to the unimpressive fourth member of their dorm-
room, not the easily-bored James, and certainly not the picky Sirius. It was Remus that allowed his
bleeding heart for underdogs to pull Peter into their circle instead of letting him be overlooked by
James' and Sirius' who were naturally more discerning. Hell, the only reason James and Sirius even
continued to allow Peter in their presence was because they knew that Remus had taken the short
and rather slow boy under his wing.

It was under Remus' own protection that the eventual traitor — a coward like himself — who
would get James and his wife killed was allowed to get close enough to betray them. Remus' childish
uneasiness about potentially having someone resent him for not including them led to the death of
two people he would've easily died for.

During school, it had been fine. Peter had been easily intimidated but never got into any sort of
trouble beyond what naturally came from being friends with unrepentant pranksters. He always came
off as rather wishy-washy, but he seemed loyal enough to the other three.

Remus functioned as the conscience of their group, but it was admittedly a faulty conscience.
James and Sirius occasionally got rather mean with their jokes, and Peter was too weak-willed to say
anything beyond the praises of hero-worship, which left Remus out-numbered when it came to
discussions of severity. Remus definitely did not approve of their relentless bullying of Lily's
childhood friend in a flawed attempt to impress her, but he loved James and Sirius so much, and was
so grateful for their acceptance, that he did not stand up to them as much as he knew he should have.

He had let his fear of losing his friends compromise his morals. His fear of being thought of badly
worked against him quite often, but he didn't have the courage to change. When they inevitably
found out that he was a werewolf, but didn't shun him with impunity, he found himself too attached,
too deeply grateful, that he could no longer bring himself to try to reason with them outside of the
token resistance, even when his eventual duty as a prefect demanded it.

Who else would accept him as his friends did? How could he risk them hating him by getting
them into trouble? He couldn't! He couldn't risk it because then they might tell people about his
condition and then everyone else would hate him as well! They swore they wouldn't ever tell, but he
could still end up alone.

By the time the four of them left school, You-Know-Who's ascendency was almost complete.
True resistance to the evil bastard was concentrated in the underground organisation called the Order
of the Phoenix, which all four of them joined. James and Sirius were full of vim and vigour about
taking up the good fight, but Remus was half out of his mind with fright most of the time and Peter
appeared to live in a constant state of terror.

And then one day Peter merely became anxious and twitchy.

They should have known it then. Remus should have known it then, or at least suspected; Peter
only ever got that way when he was (badly) trying to hide that he was involved in something he
knew would not be approved of.

The death of James and Lily, at the hands of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, was one of the most
traumatic events of Remus' life. His friends meant even more to him than he could put into words,
because he had long since accepted the fact that most people would treat him as untouchable, and
that there could be no possibility of marrying and having children. Even worse, within 24 hours he
had also lost his two other best friends. Remus was in the north of the country on Order of the Phoenix business when he heard the horrible news that one of them had murdered the other, and was now in Azkaban, a traitor to the Order and to Lily and James themselves.

The downfall of Voldemort, such a source of jubilation to the rest of the wizarding community, marked the beginning of a long stretch of loneliness and unhappiness for Remus. He had lost his three close friends and, with the Order disbanded, his previous comrades returned to busy lives with their families. His mother was now dead — a casualty in a Death Eater attack — and while his father offered sanctuary, Remus refused to endanger his father's peaceful existence by returning to live with him.

All his fears were coming to life. His friends . . . He was alone . . .

A depression that he never really grew out of plagued him. He assumed it was partially attributed to his condition, his lupine instincts in turmoil at the loss of his 'pack'. Remus began to live a hand-to-mouth existence, taking jobs that even he acknowledged were far below his level of ability, always knowing that he would have to leave them before his pattern of growing sick once a month at the full moon was noticed by his workmates.

Remus' greatest regret when thinking back to this point of his life was not even trying to find out how Heri was being raised. It was a self-loathing cycle that he was too weak to break out of.

Remus had assumed that someone far more competent than he would ever be had taken the appropriate measures to raise Heri in a good environment. Why wouldn't they? Heri was exalted as a saviour, the hero they needed when they thought all was lost. She was now the stuff of legends, even worship (he had definitely heard about a religious sect proclaiming that Heri was Neutral Good incarnate, gifted from the gods, because only a pure soul of unaligned goodness could bounce back the inherent evil of the Killing Curse*). She certainly wouldn't need or want a useless, diseased failure like Remus around. She didn't need a person that was a part of the reason she was an orphan looking after her.

In the end, it wasn't a desire to do right by Heri that had him taking up Headmaster Dumbledore's offer of a teaching position, it was his craving for a sense of what he once had and a desire to be in the presence of some small part of James and Lily that was still in the world.

Once again, Albus Dumbledore changed the course of Remus' life when he tracked him down to a tumbledown cottage in Yorkshire. Remus had been working as construction working for a small company that paid well enough by his reckoning. He was amazed when Dumbledore offered him the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, amazed and sceptical. A werewolf working in a school! Being around children! He was only persuaded to accept when the headmaster explained that there would be a limitless supply of Wolfsbane Potion, courtesy of the resident Potions Master.

It was later that Remus learned that the Potions Master was Severus Snape, the wretched boy whom Remus had done nothing to prevent his friends from tormenting. Snape's resentment after all those years was disheartening but unsurprising. It wasn't as if Remus didn't believe he fully deserved the hatred as well.

Teaching at Hogwarts was like a dream. The castle was even more magnificent than he remembered, even without the joy of being with his friends. If that wasn't enough, he was able to be near Heri, and it felt like a piece of soul mended back together. There she was, James' and Lily's precious child, the child he had only seem glimpses of between runs to scope out werewolf packs. His heart tugged uncomfortably when he saw that she kept her Potter hair restrained so severely with hair products and ornaments, but then she looked up at him with Lily's beautiful eyes, and James' endearing smile, and a sweet warmth that was all her own, and everything was right again.
His bliss made it so simple to overlook that Heri was unusually small for her age despite the fact that both of her parents had been tall. Her almost painful politeness was written off as a very traditional upbringing. Any niggling doubts were so easily brushed aside as just a quirk of being her own person. He was just so happy to see how well she was growing up.

However, Remus' flaw was at work again. Sirius had broken out of Azkaban, and Remus knew very well that Sirius was an animagus. It tortured him, knowing that Heri was in danger and that there was something he could very easily do to prevent anything from happening. All he had to do was tell the authorities that Sirius could turn into a great black dog; he should have told someone the moment he heard that Sirius had escaped. But, yet again, he didn't. He didn't tell anyone because they meant telling that the reason he knew Sirius was an animagus was because Sirius had learned to do it to keep Remus company as a werewolf.

His desperate desire to belong and to be liked meant that he was neither as brave nor as honest as he ought to have been, even when it came to protecting Heri. And in the end, it didn't even matter that he kept Sirius' secret; Snape had outed him in revenge when the end of the year came.

Oh, Remus supposed that it all worked out well for everyone involved in the end. Sirius was discovered to be innocent and Heri was taken in by her godfather as she should have been from the very beginning; Remus was reunited with one of his dearest friends and they were now all living together; he was once again amongst people that saw him for himself instead of his condition. All should have been well. But it wasn't.

Remus saw now that his sin of cowardice had stretched to include negligence as well. How had he missed that Heri had been living with people that were — at the very least — verbally abusive? How had it escaped him that no child was ever that watchful and observant of others unless something had happened to them to make them feel the need to constantly be on the look-out?

In an attempt to rectify his short-comings, Remus resolved to remain with Sirius and Heri in any capacity they required of him. Oh, he knew they thought they had talked him into sticking around with a farce of job — "household financial manager" indeed — but the truth of the matter was that Remus had no intention of being without them again for as long as he could manage.

Remus thought his heart had landed it his lower intestines when word got back to him and Sirius that Heri was to participate in the Triwizard Tournament. He spent countless sleepless nights on end with nightmares that Heri would be ripped out of his grasps once more through a horrifying death. How could the people in charge even think about having Heri participate? Sod the magically binding contract, she was a little waif of a girl, not even five feet tall, whose cheeks were still soft with baby-fat!

How could something like that have happened? That was his baby, and she was in deathly danger! Something sinister was obviously afoot!

There were no words to describe how relieved Remus was when Heri was found again after she had been abducted during the Third Task. He had been nearly incoherent with panic, falling into a state not too different from when he was a wolf, all wordless keening and primitive sounds of distress. When they found her, he burst into wracking sobs as too many emotions to keep track of ran through him.

Heri was alive and well! And he had been unable to do anything to prevent her kidnapping in the first place.

The trip to Massachusetts had actually been Remus' idea. Escape the country to lick their wounds before things could get even worse? Sirius didn't have the lack of spine necessary to come up with
such an idea. That it actually turned out to be a good holiday spot was purely coincidental. It was lucky that the Potters had a home in the States, but Remus would have suggested the trip even if their only option for accommodations was a wet cardboard box next to a rubbish bin.

Unease rose up when certain things started to go wrong as much as other things got better. Manchester-by-the-Sea was a treasure of a location, but something wasn't right with Heri. None of the doctors they took her to could figure out why she suddenly had fainting fits. Actually, 'fainting' wasn't the right word for it, nor was 'sleeping' even though that was what the healers eventually concluded it was. Fainting had nothing to do with the way Heri would suddenly collapse like a marionette whose strings were cut; sleeping was definitely not what was happening when she was sprawled in the ground like a dropped rag-doll, her breathing so slow it almost stopped entirely, her eyes only half closed, staring blankly at nothing.

Narcolepsy they called it. Yet another thing out of his control that was trying to kill his child was what Remus called it. It wasn't right; it couldn't be natural.

She was so much paler than before, something he hadn't thought would be possible with how very English her genetics were. He realised that when he was looking through some pictures he had taken back when they had just moved into Number 12. Before, she had been all peaches and cream, but now her skin was nearly translucent, his eyes easily tracing the blood-vessels that lined her eyelids and throat. It was like the colour was being drained out of her! Even her hair had lightened, the roots fading from what was originally a dark, woody brown to a worrying rusty, burnt-orangey auburn, resulting in an ombre that she just accepted and worked with.

In many ways, it was like looking at a ghost, at least a Muggle's interpretation of one. It was like she was dissolving into a spirit right in front of him, and the more her hair colour bled into reds, the more she looked like her mother.

It was starting to appear that Heri might soon end up a ghost in fact as well as appearance. The Dark forces were stirring again, the Dark Lord himself once again re-embodied. The Order had been active once more as soon as it was out that a Death Eater had been trying to bring You-Know-Who back to power.

With every passing day, Remus felt as if Heri was slipping through his fingers despite his best efforts to keep her safe. He knew that Sirius was feeling the same. But what could they do? Everything was being centred around their little girl, and it was only by the skin of their teeth that they hadn't lost her just yet.

When Headmaster Dumbledore came to them with words of a prophesy on his lips, Remus knew that the situation had reached the point where anything he might try to do would be as ineffective as a solitary aphid pitting itself against an anteater.

'The power the Dark Lord knows not . . . either must die at the hand of the other . . .'

The trigger that caused You-Know-Who to target the Potters in the first place was yet again causing the Dark Lord to prioritise Heri destruction over anything else. No amount of negotiating with werewolf packs or sabotaging Death Eater attacks would be enough to stop the evil bastard from coming after Heri, he was obsessive like that. Nothing short of absolute death would do that, and it now turned out that only Heri herself was capable of accomplishing the task.

Their Heri, the wee little moppet that he could lift with one hand, was supposed to vanquish He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Her feet still couldn't reach the floor when she sat down! Their baby-faced child who still carried around her favourite doll would be required to take on the worst Dark Lord Britain had ever seen?
As discussion began on how the prophecy would be extracted from the Department of Mysteries, Remus could only hold one of Heri's hands within his own, whether in support or as a means of comforting himself he didn't know. He watched helplessly as Heri donned such a serious, hard expression as it was decided that she would have to become actively involved in the work Professor Dumbledore was doing to destroy what he discovered were anchoring You-Know-Who to life. He listened miserably as he heard her speak so dispassionately about what would be required of her, none of the warmth or happiness he had striven to preserve left in her voice.

"I can no longer afford to care for you as much as I have," Professor Dumbledore told her at one point, his expression despondent but resolved. "I fully expect for your godfathers to manoeuvre with your best interest as prime importance, but I myself must now harden my heart. I can no longer put my affection for you before the lives of our nation."

Remus could tell that Heri didn't hold the headmaster's declaration against him, she was practical to the point of cold-blooded when it came to matters of her own well-being versus things that needed to be done, but Remus couldn't help the wave of resentment, almost hatred, that filled him. If the life of an individual now meant less than before, what stopped Professor Dumbledore from deciding that other certain individuals within their nation had to be overlooked to save the majority? What was the point of fighting for your nation if the people that made you feel like you were a part of the nation were gone?

His precious child was being marched out like lamb to slaughter. And if that wasn't cruel enough, she was going knowingly, knowing very well they were looking to her to do what they could not.

Oh, how he wanted to protest! How he wanted to declare it madness and whisk her away somewhere far out of danger's reach! Remus wanted nothing more than to hide her away in some tower until any sort of battle was finally over and no one was no longer looking to the Girl Who Lived to save them all. But he didn't. Of course, he didn't. He didn't have the courage to declare how little he cared about anyone other than his two precious people, how he would be all too willing to see Britain burn if it meant that Sirius and Heri would live long and happy lives.

What could he do anyway? Even if he did say, "To Hell with it!" he didn't have any means of actually getting them away to someplace safe. Was there anywhere in the world safe for them? The world was as big and bad as ever, even more so now that he had experienced it first-hand, and after all this time, he was still just so very, very small.

"Remus?" a quiet voice broke through his thoughts.

Remus startled a bit and looked up to see Heri watching him with concern. Between their chairs, Sirius had come to stand with a hand on both of their shoulders, his grip firm and reassuring.

The clock on the mantle showed that it was now just past midnight. Professor Dumbledore had left while Remus wasn't looking. The conversation had last far longer than Remus had realised, and physical exhaustion compounded on his mental exhaustion, making him want to just collapse on the spot and just sleep until any lingering memory of You-Know-Who was long gone. He couldn't though, so, instead, he gave the two a wan smile and began to stand up.

"We're going to get through this," Heri said suddenly, her hands hooking onto his forearm.

Those tiny, tiny hands. These were the hands that belonged to the person destined to defeat You-Know-Who? They could only wrap around his wrist halfway.

"I know that look on your face, Moony," said Sirius, he also latching Remus in place. "This isn't the time to be giving in to despair."
"Isn't it the perfect time?" Remus contradicted, his lips twitching up into a reluctant smirk.

Sirius hmph'ed.

"If we did so every time you thought to, we'd still be in the foetal position in the Shrieking Shack from that time in third-year that we found out you were a werewolf."

Heri patted Remus' elbow gently and rested her head on his arm. If it had been someone else, their head would have sat on his shoulder, but Heri's could only reach the lower half of his biceps.

"It's all rather overwhelming right now," she murmured, her eyelids falling to half-mast. "After a good sleep, we'll all feel a lot better. No doubt you'll come up with several ideas of how we'll get through this with as little trouble as possible before breakfast is even over."

Sirius chuckled and ruffled Heri's hair. She had it braided back for bed, but the fringe was loose and easy to fluff.

"You think it'll take as long as breakfast?" he teased her. "That's underestimating Moony's genius mind! No doubt he'll have every step we'll need to take to take out the Dark Bastard properly thought up before he finishes brushing his teeth!"

Remus couldn't help but join in as they shared a sleepy laugh. The wobbly smile on his face did not fall away even after he had returned to his room and climbed into bed.

Remus Lupin was a coward. He was no fierce warrior like Sirius, no steadfast soldier James had been, no fairytale hero like Heri. He was only one unfortunate man in the sea of frightened people who knew very well that there was little they could do against the Dark Lord's forces. He was one of the most terrified souls out there because he knew better than anyone else exactly what the possibilities were. He had lived through those possibilities. But for them — his parents, who had never given up on him; Lily and James, whom he had failed; Sirius and Heri, who insisted on believing in him after all his failures . . .

Remus Lupin was a coward — but for them, he would be brave.

Within the midlands of England, in a large but poor industrial town, a chilly mist drifted over a dirty river that wound between overgrown, rubbish-strewn banks. An immense chimney, relic of a disused mill, reared up, shadowy and ominous. There was no sound at this time at night apart from the whisper of the black water, and no sign of life apart from a scrawny fox that had slunk down the bank to nose hopefully at some old fish-and-chip wrappings in the tall grass. All the families — impoverished workers, the lot — had already turned in for the night in anticipation for an early start the next day.

Suddenly, with a faint pop, two hooded figures, one very distinctly taller than the other, appeared out of thin air on the edge of the river. The two took a moment to regain their bearings.

The taller one reached out a hand to the shorter one, presumably to give reassurance, but was rebuffed by their diminutive companion stepping out of reach. The two appeared to hesitate for a moment, sizing each other up, before the taller of the pair took the lead and set off with quick strides across the green, their cloak rustling over the grass. After a split-second of indecision, the smaller one followed.

At the top of the bank were a line of old railings separated the river from a narrow, cobbled street. As the pair strode forward, they couldn't help but note that across the road had rows and rows of
dilapidated brick houses, their windows dull and blind in the darkness. They slipped through a gap in the rusty railings and crossed the road to move through an alley between the houses into a second, almost identical street. Some of the street lamps were broken; the two walked quickly between patches of light and deep darkness.

They moved deeper into the deserted labyrinth of brick houses and hurried up a street named Spinner's End, over which the towering mill chimney seemed to hover like a giant admonitory finger. Their footsteps echoed on the cobbles as they passed boarded and broken windows, until they reached the very last house, where a dim light glimmered through the curtains in a downstairs room.

Without faltering, the taller of the pair strode up to the door of this house and used the scuffed knocker to pound the door smartly.

They stood in wait, breathing in the smell of the dirty river that was carried to them on the night breeze. After a few seconds, they heard movement behind the door, and it opened a crack. A sliver of a man could be seen looking out at them, a man with long black hair parted in curtains around a sallow face and black eyes.

"Headmaster," said Severus Snape, his expression nowhere near delighted, but not exactly displeased either. His eyes flickered to the shorter figure standing at Dumbledore's left. "And Miss Potter as well I see. Do come in."

"Good evening, sir," the girl murmured perfunctorily as Dumbledore bid his thanks.

They stepped directly into a tiny sitting room, which had the feeling of a dark, padded cell. The walls were completely covered in books, most of them bound in old black or brown leather; a threadbare sofa, an old armchair, and a rickety table stood grouped together in a pool of dim light cast by a candle-filled lamp hung from the ceiling. The place had an air of neglect, as though it was not usually inhabited.

"Sit down if you like," said Severus, coming up behind them. He directed them toward the sofa. "I'll fetch us some tea."

Severus spent the next few minutes arranging a tray with some hot water he had left in the kettle, tea leaves, small pitchers of milk and sugar, and a plate of some shortbread biscuits he didn't remember purchasing. He then brought it over and set it on the table between the armchair and sofa, clearing the table off of a few unopened letters.

"Do not hesitate to help yourselves," he said, sitting down in the remaining open seat.

As his two guests voiced their thanks, Severus took in the sight of them.

Both looked rumpled and exhausted, the bags under Dumbledore's eyes even more pronounced than usual. Their faces were pale and drawn in, the girl looking positively wretched, as if she would drop dead on the ground at any second. Hell, she even wore the most unpleasant expression he had ever seen on her face, though it was still just on the side of bothered were it anyone else. Judging by the stiff way she was holding herself, the dismal state of those gloves she had been wearing since the damned tournament, and the way Dumbledore covertly glanced at her every few seconds, something troubling had happened.

And, naturally, they had come to him to do something about it.

When the lull had gone on long enough, Severus addressed the headmaster.

"You have never before visited me within my home, Headmaster," he said, giving the older man
a steady look. "I was not anticipating a Patronus message requesting to do so."

"I apologise for the short notice, Severus," Dumbledore said wearily. "A situation came up suddenly and it would have been remiss to not have it taken care of at once. No doubt you have already gathered that we require your assistance on a matter."

"Such a matter involves Miss Potter as well?" Severus rejoined mockingly. "I did not think the pair of mutts allowed her to risk her neck in dealings beyond her modest capabilities."

Severus had severely mixed feelings about the Potter chit, feelings that were only exacerbated by the fact that the girl hardly resembled either of her late parents beyond the cosmetic traits. He disliked being indecisive almost as much as he currently disliked the regretfully unincarcerated Black, so he typically avoided her altogether, never talking to her outside what was strictly necessary.

He didn't know what it was, but trying to be his usual caustic self with her was rather like being in a room full of baby animals and having no choice but to deliberately step on a puppy. There was horror of the Dear-God-what-have-I-done-?! type that you had inadvertently harmed such an innocuous creature, and then the encompassing panic that you would undoubtedly do so again because you couldn't leave without doing so at least once more. Severus was as much a slave as anyone else to the inborn human instinct of trying to protect things that looked babyish no matter how much he disliked children, and — curse it all — Heri Potter provoked all his protective instincts with her green doe eyes set in a face so much like a young Lily. Had this been a world where he and Lily never fell out and he had ended up the girl's father or godfather, he didn't doubt he would dote just as idiotically on her as Black did.

It was only on this occasion that he felt remorselessly free to torment her, being because the ruffled, almost petulant look on her face was much like one her blasted bastard of a sire often wore when Lily rebuffed him.

Seeing a face like Lily's pulling James Bloody Potter's expressions ignited a furious agony in Severus' stomach whenever the occasions came about. Reminders of the fact that he had ruined everything with a careless burst of anger, and had allowed Potter to snatch up his dearest treasure. He wanted to strangle the girl as much as he wanted to hold her and never let go. Most of the time, that face was set in a soft, wide-eyed expression, paired with a quiet, nearly meek disposition that neither of her parents had been capable of. Lily being soft-spoken? James Potter being conscientious of his words? One might as well expect Lucius Malfoy to donate his entire wealth to a charity for Muggles. But little Potter wore those traits well, so well that on nearly every occasion that he had found to berate her, he would feel a pang of guilt.

Not so on this occasion though. She must have been in a truly foul mood, he had only heard rumour of her temper before and none of them mentioned an actual frown like Severus was seeing currently.

At his derogatory words, the girl's slight frown turned into a moue of distinct displeasure as she gave him a flinty stare from under hooded eyelids. Severus felt the hair on his arms raise under his long sleeves; he'd had a similar look directed at him before from Bellatrix Lestrange during her saner periods.

"My dodgy talents aside," the girl said lowly, her tone startlingly unimpressed and disrespectful, "I reckon it's a damned good thing I was around tonight, else Professor Dumbledore 'ere woulda made short work o' poppin' his bloody clogs, or ended up completely off 'is chump, primed for the soddin' loony bin if not worse right now. An' the rest of us woulda been shit outta luck tryin' ta off tha' tosspot of a Dark wanker!"
Severus was visibly taken aback. If the vulgar language wasn't enough, the girl's inflection degraded until it was better suited to the wretched guttersnipes that roamed Cokesworth! Merciful Merlin, he knew that Black moron was a bad influence on her! What in the world was Lupin doing?

"Mind your mouth when in my house!" Severus reprimanded harshly. "Black may let you speak as you like, but children will maintain a civil tongue in my presence!"

He was upbraiding Heri Potter, a little Hufflepuff Prefect, for speaking as if she lived on a canal barge. He hadn't even known before that she could be anything other than mild-mannered, never mind that there was an attitude hidden underneath all that fluff! Good Lord, it was like witnessing a hamster devour a human limb.

The girl did not apologise. Instead, she huffed at him and nibbled on a biscuit pointedly.

Severus noted that Dumbledore did nothing to refute Potter’s self-celebratory claim, nor did he scold her for her crude and low-brow language. The headmaster merely winced and stared into his tea forlornly.

"Nothing to say, Headmaster?” Severus asked, crossing his arms and leaning back in his seat.

The old man sighed.

"While somewhat indelicately put, Miss Potter's words are quite true. I do not doubt I would not have lived to see the morrow had I remained unaccompanied in my venture this evening."

"Tell 'im how ya tried to take me with ya," the girl snapped. "Tell 'im how ya jumped right outta yer ruddy rocker fer a ruddy rock y'knew damn well had been cursed!"

"Hold your tongue, girl!" Severus barked. "Noisy brats should be silent when adults are talking!"

The girl turned and actually snarled at him!

It looked like she was ready to jump at him if it wasn't for Dumbledore placing a restraining hand on her shoulder. She then flinched violently and scooted as far away as she could on the sofa. As he had heard from the Slytherin Quidditch team that it happen on the Hogwarts express back in her third year, things started shaking, books falling off the shelves, a lamp shattering out.

Inexplicably, what looked like a tentacle flew out from behind her back and wrapped itself around Dumbledore's wrist. It yanked the hand from the girl's person and flung it back at the startled old man before weaving in the air in front of him in an obviously threatening manner.

Severus' jaw actually fell open. His arm flew up automatically, his wand in his hand.

"What the devil is that?!" he hollered, jumping to his feet.

"Nothing to worry about, Severus!" Dumbledore declared, raising his hands in a show of non-aggression.

Nothing to worry about? A tentacle had come out of nowhere! And the girl was causing a miniature earthquake! The bookshelves themselves were stuttering against the floor. Severus' muggle neighbours whose home adjoined his probably thought a train had derailed!

Though he had spoken to Severus, Dumbledore was still looking at the girl.

"I beg your pardon, my dear!" he apologised earnestly. "I did not intend to frighten you."
As if the situation was not strange enough, the girl appeared to be flickering in and out of chromatic saturation, as if she were an old fashion television that wasn't tuned quite right. All the while, her pupils and irises were expanding and retracting, her eyes going from human to almost completely black, like those of an animal. Meanwhile, Severus was casting spells on his furniture to keep them from smacking against each other and being destroyed.

"Potter!" Severus bellowed. "Desist from your dramatics before the authorities are called in!"

"Heri, my dear girl, you're safe here," the Headmaster said, his tone becoming soothing. "We are with Professor Snape, in his home, and you know that he takes your welfare very seriously."

Though Severus doubted the words were any actual comfort, Potter drew in a ragged breath and appeared to reign in the strange phenomenon. Her flickering stopped altogether after a moment, and her eyes settled back into their usual large but human size. The tentacle thing stayed though.

"Am I going to receive any answers tonight?" Severus snarled, shaken and confused. He had not yet lowered his wand though his grip did loosen.

Keeping an eye on the twitchy girl, Dumbledore finally obliged Severus by explaining what the Hell had happened.

Apparently, for quite a while now, Dumbledore had been researching Dark methods that the Dark Lord could have possibly used to remain on the mortal plane when any other should have moved on. Countless hours and long nights had yielded a likely answer in the form of a strange type of anchor, tying his disembodied soul to life, known amongst forbidden texts as a 'Horcrux'. Dumbledore theorised that the Dark Lord had several of them, considering how the one that had been discovered before, the diary that had possessed the Weasley girl a few years back, had been used as a weapon instead of being kept hidden. Dumbledore had concluded the Dark Lord's horcruxes were things he placed great importance in.

And so, because she had experienced a Horcrux before, as well as being in need of knowledge of how to combat the Dark Lord, the Potter girl was brought along to assist the Headmaster on his expedition to destroy the wretched things.

The first excursion had been just earlier that evening, to the home of the late Gaunt family, who were apparently the family the Dark Lord's mother had come from. (Severus couldn't really imagine the Dark Lord being an infant, never mind being born from something as innocuous as a human mother; surely such an iniquitous beast had spawned into existence when the earth cracked open a hell-mouth, releasing a demon into the world.) The Gaunts were accounted to be as insane and vicious as the Dark Lord himself, albeit nowhere near as powerful. The Headmaster had decided to search there first because he had been given a memory that contained mention of two items that could have been turned into horcruxes, items that were said to be heirlooms of the Slytherin family.

It turned out that the village they arrived at, Little Hangleton, was the same village that contained the graveyard the girl had been abducted to, and the Gaunt Shack was a place she had wandered into when she was escaping into the village proper. Severus would have been more surprised if he hadn't already known the brat's propensity for finding herself in the exact places she should not be. And if that wasn't enough, the Horcrux they were looking for, the ring that the Dark Lord's grandfather, Marvolo Gaunt, had claimed belonged to their Head of House, had been found by the girl the last time she was there. In fact, she had been wearing it since then!

"How was I supposed to know it was something like that?" the girl muttered when Dumbledore spoke of her find with exasperation. She had come back to her usual calm but still had yet to return to her manners. "It's pretty enough I suppose, but it was a plain ring that was left in an abandoned
house. Not exactly the Crown Jewels, was it?"

This was the point when Severus became confused about why what had happened had happened at all.

The Potter girl took over the explanation to tell Severus that Dumbledore had taken one good look at the ring on her finger before going absolutely out of his mind.

"You should have seen his face! I've seen less hungry looks on stray animals!"

By her account — which the headmaster did not refute — he had first tried to coax her into taking the ring off and giving it to him, but soon degenerated into physically trying to remove the bit of jewellery from her person, even outright shaking her at one point.

"He eventually managed to touch it," she said, "but pulled back when his fingers started turning black. It felt like I'd been smacked across the hand, but it must have felt much worse for Professor Dumbledore, because he gave a right **gruesome** howl before the blackness went away."

All the while, she said, he had been babbling something about "the stone!", his expression growing increasingly more manic than she had ever seen outside of the criminally insane.

(Severus then wondered how it came about that she had been in the presence of the unlawfully unhinged so often that she could pinpoint their nuanced characteristics, but he kept the question to himself, not sure if he truly wanted to know.)

Severus wasn't sure what to think. Had there been a curse on the ring to induce obsession? Was that why Dumbledore had been so determined to lay hand on it? But would have been the point? What had caused his fingers to turn black and why had the girl not been affected the same?

Severus asked the last question out loud.

"I believe it to be a curse of a sort," Dumbledore answered. "Though why Heri is not being affected I do not know. It's possible that Voldemort placed intention-based magic on it so that anyone that knew what it was would perish."

"That sounds far too lenient for the Dark Lord," Severus contradicted. "It would be more to his usual method to simply have it that anyone that found it would die."

"Besides," the girl chimed in, "I was affected in a way. **Something** certainly happened when it was almost taken from me."

"Perhaps we should try . . . ?" Dumbledore began only to trail off at the distrustful look on the girl's face. He sighed with resignation. "I mean Professor Snape, of course, my dear."

Severus was not eager to lay hand on a cursed object, but he was equally reluctant to have said object remain in the hands of a child he strove to keep alive and preferably **uncursed**. He fetched a silk cloth — the best precaution to contain Dark objects — and made to pull the ring from the girl's finger.

Barely two seconds after it had been removed, Potter gasped painfully as jagged black veins crawled up from where the ring had sat. She yelped as her fingers appeared to curl into themselves without her direction. As she cradled the hand to her chest, they could see the flesh of the appendage blackening and withering.

Severus tugged the girl's hand back out and jammed the ring back on, blood pounding in his ears.
She gave another gasp, but this time it was less of pain and more of relief.

As they observed, the damaged retreated. Within a breathless moment that lasted far longer than Severus would have liked, the hand returned to its previous good health, though it was twitching from remembered pain.

"I had assumed it had something to do with Heri's apparent immunity to Voldemort's most malicious magic," Dumbledore said after they regained their wits. "I had believed it had something to do with the protection Lily had left within her blood. I now suppose it has something to do with the nature of the ring itself that's stops the wearer from coming to deathly harm."

"What nature could the Dark Lord's trinket have that it would stop one that was being cursed by the Dark Lord from succumbing?" asked Severus, keeping an eye on the girl as she stared at the ring with shock.

"In truth," Dumbledore replied, "I do not think Voldemort knows of its nature, which is why he made it into one of his anchors'. It is the stone upon the ring that is key. The stone is part of a set of objects that, when brought together, is supposed to grant the wielder power over death."

Severus frowned at the man.

"What objects do you speak of?" he questioned. "I've never heard of any such artifacts."

"Is that why you were so insistent on getting it from me?" the girl asked, looking up again.

Dumbledore sighed.

"Alas, I had been fascinated by the research of them when I was young. I regret that I let myself be so overcome that I became easily influenced."

"I'll say you were," the girl agreed, disapproval apparent. "It must have been some shock if it got you to pull your wand on me."

Severus threw a sharp look at the headmaster, his expression not softening even when taking in the older man's sorrowful and ashamed mien.

Attacking a child was something not easily forgiven, even by Severus who would have been happier if people sprung fully grown into the world. Attacking Lily's daughter, the child Severus had Vowed to keep safe and had come to be fond of in his own painfully reluctant way, was a sin he could team up with Black and Lupin to correct. Dumbledore knew very well that the only loyalty Severus had left in the world was to the well-being of Heri Potter; he had some nerve coming to Severus' home and admitting he had been a personal danger to her.

Dumbledore reclaimed the detailing of what happened to admit that he very likely would have done something unforgivable had it not been for tentacles springing out of nowhere to disarm and bind him. He had been taken off guard enough that he had been whacked thoroughly over the head and ended up under wandpoint by his own wand. He said this ruefully, looking over his wand with a bittersweet expression Severus didn't understand.

The tentacles, as Dumbledore learned, were actually extensions of the girl. Severus found this hard to accept until the girl in question obligingly sprouted another, this time from the visible part of her shoulder that wasn't covered by her shirt.

Severus stared at the inexplicable limbs which drifted and rippled in the air as if they were underwater. They were about the same colour as the girl's skin but a bit pinker, much like the palms
of her hands. They looked to be two of her fingers in thickness, and of indeterminable length considering how they lengthened and shortened sporadically under his gaze. If that wasn't all impossible enough, they seemed to demonstrate different emotion than she was exhibiting, one still hovering in front of Dumbledore, weaving like a defensive snake, the other was twisting and dipping in a shy manner, as if curious about the room.

"...What?"

Severus didn't know what else to say.

"These are my tendrils," the girl said, looking put out for whatever reason. "They're vestigial limbs that I can wield when two hands aren't enough."

What in Hell was Severus supposed to say to that?

He settled with, "Do you even know what 'vestigial' means, Potter?" because, honestly, there was nothing that looked particularly underdeveloped about them.

By this time, she had fully mellowed, so, instead of snapping back as he assumed she would have if he had continued prodding her earlier, she gave him a flat look so bland he imagined that he could no longer taste the tea he had been drinking.

"'Vestigial' means underdeveloped, incomplete, or fundamental, sir," she replied, her tone impeccably polite once again, and this time Severus assumed it was mockingly so. "Since my tendrils contain no bones, joints, or even actual flesh, I don't consider them true limbs."

Great. Marvellous. Just what Severus wanted to hear when common sense decided to take a holiday. Absolutely swell. Maybe next the impossible girl would grow a set of wings out of her arse, because why not?

"And what in Merlin's name have you done to yourself that you now have these 'vestigial limbs'?" Severus growled. He had thought her more intelligent than to muck about with magic beyond her knowledge. He should have known that any child under Sirius Black's dubious care, no matter how sensible, would get involved in something so moronic that it would be a miracle they weren't dying in St. Mungo's terminal ward.

The little chit narrowed her eyes at him again, albeit this time coldly.

"I did nothing to get them," she declared loftily. "They're natural. I developed them in third-year because of all the dementors about."

Severus sucked in a breath through his nose and rubbed his face with a hand. If the girl would start making sense maybe they would actually get somewhere!

"There is no known condition of turning into some sort of humanoid cephalopod when coming into contact with soul-sucking spirits!" he barked. "Explain yourself properly, or I will assume you are being possessed by a long-departed cthulhu and exorcise you accordingly!"

Both of her so-called 'tendrils' reacted to the show of aggression, whipping forward to lashed the air in his direction, rather similar in manner to Hogwarts' giant squid. They lengthened before two more tendrils spawned, this time coming from the girl's other side. As he glared, they actually sharpened at the ends, the second pair growing spikes.

He eyed them warily. Perhaps provoking an already jumpy brat who had powers he currently knew nothing about wasn't the best idea. Still, the annoying itch had some nerve, actually
threatening him, in his own home no less!

"Heri . . ." Dumbledore began carefully. He also had a careful eye on the menacing things. "Professor Snape does not mean to threaten you. He is simply overwrought and is responding by casting out his frustration with his words."

Damn the old berk for making Severus sound like a right brat in the middle of a temper tantrum. Even if it was true, there was no reason to word it in such a way in front of one of their students.

The girl didn't appear to appreciate Dumbledore's words either. Looking a touch embarrassed, she reached out her hands and physically pulled the agitated limbs away from Severus.

"I know that," she said in response, flicking one of the spiked ones. "But that doesn't mean I can stop them from reacting automatically to what they think is a danger to me."

"Are you saying you can't control yourself?" Severus sneered. He jolted back when a sharpened one lunged at him, only held back from lancing him through the face by the girl yanking it back before it could reach him.

"I'm saying that they respond instinctively," she rejoined, giving him a pointed look. "And you'd be best off holding back your bile while they're out. I suppose I am a bit like a humanoid cephalopod; they obey me for the most part, but they are fully capable of responding independently. And they don't understand words, only tone and intention. If I need something, they'll pick it up; if I'm in danger, they'll attack. Rather like the ophidians on a gorgon, I suppose."

"Then put them away for Merlin's sake!" Severus snapped. "And then sprout another one that isn't so short-tempered so we can get a proper look at it!"

The girl huffed but did as she was told. Four visibly objecting tendrils were drawn back in and replaced with a much more mild-mannered one.

Severus stayed on guard. After seeing what the earlier ones were like, he wouldn't be surprised if the present one suddenly became aggressive as well. The way it was behaving now reminded Severus quite a bit of how the brat it was attached to usually behaved, and he now knew that there was actually a snarling hell-spawn hiding underneath that lulling front.

In a way, this proof of temper gladdened Severus. The girl had always been so dissimilar to her parents; it was a relief to discover that a facet of Lily's personality, if only her hair-trigger temper, lived on. Granted, the girl's triggers were not as abundant as Lily's had been, but when prodded just right, her claws certainly came flying.

When it proved to be untroubled by their approach, Severus and Dumbledore examined the tendril with fascination. As the girl said, it contained nothing within a proper limb, a quick medical diagnostic spell proved that. In fact, it gave off a reading quite similar to scarring caused by Dark magic, more magic than physical matter.

Severus gave it an experimental tug, stretching it a bit. He noted that it had an elasticity similar to rubber. It also had the most curious feel to it, being softer and smoother than anything he had ever felt before, even satin.

"Like a baby's cheek," Dumbledore murmured as he twirled it about, testing the flexibility of it. "How many can you maintain at a time?"

"No more than eight so far," she answered. "I dunno if that's my limit or if I have to work at it to get more, but I've found the more I have out, the less the tendrils can do it terms of sprouting spikes
"And you say it was caused by being in the presence of dementors?" Severus asked, looking up to check the girl's expression.

Her cheeks were a bit pink, but her expression had not changed from her standard look of polite and unjudging attention. He now suspected this was a mask for her true feelings. Either that or she had a severe personality and mood disorder.

"Yes, Professor," she replied. (Oh, they were back to 'Professor' now, were they? She really was a cheeky thing.) "It began when I fell from my broom during that Quidditch match with the dreadful rain. When they surrounded me, it triggered what the centaurs are calling my 'phantom form.' After that—"

"What do the centaurs have to do with anything?" Severus cut in, releasing his hold on her tendril so that his attention would not be divided.

"They've been helping me train my abilities since my second year, sir," she answered, as if this was a perfectly typical thing for the centaurs of the Forbidden Forest to be doing.

She had to be behaving deliberately obtuse. There was no way she could possibly believe that all this was normal!

"And why have they been training you, my dear?" inquired Dumbledore, perfectly unperturbed.

Severus rarely appreciated it, but Dumbledore really did have the patience an unflappability of a saint. Severus wondered what they old codger had put up with before that a defensive Heri Potter not following any school of logic was not something to pull one's hair out about.

"The centaurs saved me from the acromantulas that Hagrid suggested I talk to when they decided they would rather eat me than talk," the girl said, as infuriatingly nonchalant as she usually was.

Severus gnashed his teeth. They would be having words about her gadding about the Forbidden Forest later! What else had she gotten up to when he thought she was tucked away in the safety of the castle?

"After I gave one of them a good talking to for bad-mouthing Hagrid for being a bit thoughtless," she carried on, "the two that came to talk to me said that since they had discovered me, they had to train me, and that I was the first one they had discovered in a long time. I wondered why they'd never trained one of the others from the castle, but I suppose none of the others have come into contact with the centaurs at all, never mind when they didn't know. Care of Magical Creatures lessons don't usually involve meeting the centaurs, do they?"

" 'One of the others'?' Severus echoed. "One of the other students? Why in the world would the centaurs want to educate Hogwarts students in anything at all?"

The girl blinked rapidly for a moment as she stared at them with incomprehension. After a moment, a look of understanding then dawned on her face.

"Oh, did I not mention it before?" she said, looking abashed. "I'm a godborn. That's why they wanted to train me."

Chapter End Notes
*This little aside to how people see Heri was inspired by Growing Pains by SensiblyTainted, a Drarry fic that's a real tear-jerker. Honestly, many of you might have already read it since it was written back in 2005-06. It's practically a HP fanfic classic. Obviously it's slash, and it gets a little cliché in places, but it's well worth the read if you're looking for a plot-driven story with dashes of romance.

AN: In case you got confused by my use of both 'prophecy' and 'prophesy', the former is a noun, and the latter is a verb. So "she is gifted with prophecy," and "he was prophesying a harsh winter". When prophets make prophecies, they prophesy, not "prophesize." And the correct spelling of the past tense form is actually "prophesied."
Half a month before the start of the term, over a week since Professor Dumbledore and Heri had recruited Professor Snape to join them in destroying Voldemort's anchors, the three of them travelled from the headmaster's office to the Ministry Headquarters. Professor Snape had heard murmurs from the Death Eaters that plans were being made to retrieve something from the Department of Mysteries, and Professor Dumbledore had concluded that Voldemort intended to hear the prophecy in its entirety. So, to gain the upper hand, it was decided that the three of them would retrieve it before the opposition could move forward.

As a way of preventing the eyes of the Death Eaters in the Ministry from taking note of Professor Snape being involved in something he had not reported to Voldemort, they floo'd directly into the Department of Mysteries' front office.

The two men arrived in dignified manners, but Heri's allergy of all magical travel methods besides flying had her stumbling out of the fireplace like a drunkard. The only reason she did not fall to the ground was because she tripped into Professor Snape's back instead, nearly making him stumble as well.

With a blush of embarrassment and a murmur of apology, she allowed herself to be aided upright by Professor Dumbledore as Professor Snape gave her a blank look she couldn't decipher. He didn't seem angry at least.

Since the fiasco of a get-together at Professor Snape's home, both gentlemen were now looking at Heri with . . . she couldn't say more respect, because Professor Snape certainly didn't respect anyone, never mind Heri, but there was certainly something of a higher measure of regard toward her competence. As strange as it was, they no longer looked at her as some fragile prize that needed to be protected, something she hadn't realised they had been doing until they stopped. This was not unexpected from Professor Dumbledore since he had already addressed his intentions of putting the future of the wizarding world before her personal safety, but it was exceedingly strange in Professor Snape, because he had always treated her with a 'gentle touch' he hadn't even granted to first years for as long as she had known him.

She wondered if Professor Snape realised he'd always given her preferential treatment before. It wasn't as obvious as actually being kind — heavens forbid he actually show some common decency — but he showed a marked lack of animosity that he seemed to have for the world at large toward her. Heri hadn't known anyone could loathe more or less everything as much as Professor Snape appeared to, but that hostility was subdued when it came to Heri. Of course, he was too prideful to favour her as he did his Slytherins, but he ignored her during lessons and didn't say a word to anyone who partnered with her, even when they were melting cauldrons, something that happened quite often when her partners got intimidated by his baleful glower.

After establishing that Heri wasn't joking in the least bit when she said she was a godborn, the two men began flinging questions at her rapid-fire. She was questioned on everything, from her heritage to how many others she knew of. Apparently, those of divine descent were actually a bit more scarce than her comrades at Hogwarts had led her to believed. Oh, they were known to exist, but they had been retreating since World War I, and one had not let themselves be known by the 'unendowed' (as Ernie politically-correctly put it) since the beginning of World War II.
Heri didn't really understand why it had to be such a big secret — it wasn't like wizards were Muggles or anything — but she didn't reveal the identities of the other semi-divine students that she knew of; it would have felt like a betrayal of their trust. However, she did let the two professors know that there was always a dozen or more at Hogwarts during any given school year. The headmaster was positively giddy at the thought!

"But how can two fully human parents make a godborn?" Professor Snape had demanded, looking ready to shake her. "Neither of your parents were gods!"

"You can't know that, Severus," Professor Dumbledore had countered. "They've often lived amongst us without being discovered. It's not out of the question that Lily or maybe James had been a deity in disguise."

Professor Snape had looked primed to bust a vein at the thought, but Heri soon put forward all the possibilities she knew of.

"It's been known to happen that a god will disguise themselves as a person's spouse to procreate with them," she had said tonelessly, noting that Professor Snape looked even more upset at this thought. "A god might also possess a person so that the resulting child has technically three parents. It also might come about that a god creates a child from pure thought, though I've been told that's usually limited to creation and intelligence-based deities. The point is: I don't know how I'm a godborn, only that I am one, and that both my mortal parents were true parents in every definition of the word."

Honestly, she didn't know why they were so amazed. Sure, it had been a while, but godborns weren't exactly on the verge of extinction. Heri thought of them a bit like people who had wide singing ranges or naturally violet eyes: they were rare and admirable traits, but nothing earth-shattering.

It was Professor Dumbledore that ending up explaining that one.

Apparently, Grindelwald — the Dark menace of Europe before Voldemort — had used Adolf Hitler, a son of Hades, to be the muggle face for his war on Muggles.* With Hitler at the forefront, they then deceived other godborns to join the cause. After discovering they were being exploited, wizarding godborns en masse retreated even further away from the public eye, not even the proudest of the previously known lines bragging about it any longer. So long had it been since a wizarding godborn had announced themselves that people no longer knew if even the lines that had previously been well known for their descent were producing any more children who were blessed with divinity.

Even without knowing if she was anywhere near as powerful as the famous godborns of old, before they could suppress it, Professors Dumbledore and Snape had looked at her as if she had descended from upon high to answer their pious prayers. Admittedly, she was not unused to such looks being directed at her, especially from the religious sects, but seeing it being given by people who knew her personally, whom she knew very well were amongst the upper echelons of their nation's power-based social meritocracy . . . well, it was unsettling to say the least. godborn or not, experienced with monster-slaying or not, allegedly the most powerful witch of her age or not, Heri was a teenage girl who hadn't even finished her education yet.

Honestly, show a bloke a bit of battle experience and it was suddenly no more free candy or hand-holding. This was only metaphorical in Professor Snape's case, but the sentiment was the same.

Truthfully, it was a bit lonely to no longer be 'coddled' by the Potions Master; he'd been the only
person outside of Sirius and Remus that knew she was capable of handling herself for the most part but still thought to mind for her safety. At least now she could relax back from her strict civility reserved for people that thought her more a symbol than a person and finally be the cheeky brat she had always wanted to be in response to Professor Snape's abrasive sarcasm. She owed him quite a few headaches for his jabs at how Sirius and Remus were raising her.

Presently, they had landed in a very cluttered but spacious office that seemed to be overwhelmed by towers of folders, and sheaves of parchment and paper, all stacked precariously about the room and clearly held upright solely through magic. There were also boxes upon boxes, each labelled with numbers and letters, and accented by the occasional stack of books.

A man was standing behind a large (and also cluttered) desk, having obviously been waiting for them. He was wearing dark navy-blue robes with sleeves that were buttoned tightly against his forearms before they blossomed out loosely at his the start of his elbows. The garment reminded Heri of the sort that Professor Snape always wore to prevent his clothing from interfering with his brewing. The hood of the man's outer-robe was up, and it cast a shadow across his face. It appeared to be magically obscuring the man's face, because the lighting in the room shouldn't have cast such a dark shadow.

Fascinating, Heri thought. She had been thinking of becoming an Unspeakable back when she received advice on career-aiming back in fifth-year. Professor Sprout had mentioned it as a possibility when she noted Heri's marks in Ancient Runes, divination, and Arithmancy. Heri hadn't known about the department's uniform before, but she thought it to be right impressive.

"Welcome to the Department of Mysteries, Miss Potter, Mr. Dumbledore, Mr. Snape," the man said briskly, nodding his head at each of them. "I am Unspeakable Mannaz-2-Theta. I will escort you to your destination."

He then addressed the two men.

"It would be in your best interest to not touch any of the prophecy orbs. They have been made so only the subjects of the prophecy within may make physical contact with them without causing damage to the person."

Professor Dumbledore looked unsurprised but inclined his head in acknowledgement. Professor Snape frowned but made no comment.

"All wands, magical objects, and the like must be left here," the Unspeakable continued, motioning to a wire container sitting on the edge of the desk. "The Department of Mysteries does not allow unauthorised magic within the premises, as they may interfere with projects currently being worked on."

Professor Snape outright scowled at this.

"You expect us to go about unarmed through an unknown location?" he scoffed. "This department is still being inspected for corruption, it would not be a stretch to be concerned for our safety because of this lack of assurance."

Heri got the impression that the Unspeakable was narrowing his eyes at Professor Snape.

"Be that as it may," said the Unspeakable, "no non-personnel may enter while still holding their wand."
The two contradicting men had a silent stare-off for approximately ten seconds before Professor Dumbledore settled the matter by putting his wand in the receptacle and looking at Professor Snape expectantly. Professor Snape all but growled with displeasure but surrendered his wand all the same.

Heri did the same before looking to the Unspeakable for further instruction.

"All wands and the like, Miss Potter," he reiterated, his tone stern.

She blinked at him blankly for a moment before she realised what he was talking about. Cheeks heating with embarrassment again, this time for being slow on the uptake, she began removing her disguised foci.

She had been caught up in paranoia since Dumbledore had gone mad when they were at the Gaunt Shack. Well, more paranoia than usual. It wasn't easy working with someone who had admitted they would sacrifice you if the occasion called for it. Since then, she had been taking to wearing as many of her foci — both re-usable and disposable — as possible, transfiguring their ornamental parts each day to match her outfits so she wouldn't get strange looks. She was rather certain that Sirius and Remus thought that she was going through a frivolous phase because of the pressure of having a prophecy dropped on her head.

Ah, well. At the very least Megan, Hannah, and Sally-Anne were tickled at getting to dress her up so often. They had done so on that day as well, though they were disappointed they wouldn't be allowed to come along too. Her friends didn't actually know what Heri was getting up to when she had no time to gad about with them, but they seemed to be under the assumption that she was off doing exciting, heroic things. Pity that reality wasn't nearly as fun as fantasy.

On that day, she was wearing a stack of bangles on one arm, a modest-looking stone pendant around her neck, a charm anklet hidden by her long skirt, and a collection of pearl-topped grips on top of her usual hair-sticks; all that she could get away with because of the professional setting of the day's appointment. She had actually been thinking about getting piercings so she could haul around more. She hadn't expected to be required to surrender her emergency supplies, let alone be identified as having them.

"How did you even know?" she asked, a little putout, pulling out the last of her hair ornaments and tossing it in with the rest. She then hiked up one side of her skirt a bit so she could step out of her shoe and slide off the anklet. "The point of having these at all is because no one would think they're anything besides what they look like!"

"There are spells within this office to detects such things," the Unspeakable answered simply.

While Professor Dumbledore looked amused, Professor Snape had on the same unreadable expression as before, this time mixed with alarm.

"Who gave you alternative foci?" Professor Snape demanded. "No craftsman in Diagon would sell them to an unlicensed witch, let alone an under-age one!"

Heri was a bit chagrined at being caught 'red-handed' so to speak, and looked at the Potions Master in askance as she ran her fingers through her roots and fished out a bobble from her pocket. She began tying up her now unpinned hair.

Hmm, it was a lot longer than it had been when she had last had it loose in public, back when she was a first-year. She hadn't paid attention to the length in a long time, but it was now hitting around the top of her thighs even when pulled up. She couldn't imagine how long it would be if she
straightened out her contrarious curls.

"I'll take your word for it, sir," Heri replied. "I bought these in Whimsic. Since the shop is still in business, I assume that none of these need a license."

"I believe we are all ready then?" the Unspeakable stated more than asked before Professor Snape could voice his apparent outrage. He walked around his desk and went to open the door. He clearly did not expect any sort of reply. "Come along this way. Your time here is limited."

Heri blinked at the man's impatience, but she followed all the same, not eager to hear Professor Snape's scolding for whatever it was he thought she had done wrong.

Professor Snape ground his teeth almost audibly, but held his tongue as he stalked forward.

The Unspeakable guided them down a long, windowless and featureless hallway with a tall black door at the end of it. They were led inside in silence, and the man soon motioned for them to come to a stop. Heri looked around for the briefest moment — just long enough to see that it was a circular room surrounded by a number of unmarked, identical doors — when the wall suddenly began to spin frantically, leaving her feeling terrible dizzy and disoriented.

Just before she got queasy, it stopped.

Heri was on the verge of asking what had just happened, but the Unspeakable was already on the move again, striding confidently over to one of the doors and pulling it open.

Beyond was a long, grey hallway lined with more doors — all unmarked — along each side. The three of them walked down the hall towards the end before the Unspeakable stopped at once of the doors and pulled it open. He motioned Heri and Professor Dumbledore inside before following behind them.

The room was much like the halls they'd come from — grey walls, plain slate floor, no windows. Its only feature was a large circular table in the centre on the room with four chairs placed evenly.

"Sit," the Unspeakable said shortly.

Heri thought the man rather rude, but she ignored it, going over to sit in one of the chairs, the headmaster taking the one on her right, and Professor Snape taking the one on her left.

"The head of the Prophetic Studies Division will be by shortly — you will have to wait for him, he's a very busy man and is taking his time out of his work schedule to assist you in this. He's the only one who can remove the prophecies from their placement in the hall besides the subjects of the prophecies themselves."

"May I ask why you do not simply have us go in and retrieve the prophecy ourselves then?" Professor Dumbledore asked politely.

The man eyed the headmaster for several seconds.

"The Hall of Prophecies," he began, his tone bland, "is a vast space filled with many sensitive objects of considerable import that we cannot risk for such a small task. We would have to pass through one of the two other halls to get there, and both of those rooms also contain many important, dangerous, and irreplaceable objects. Miss Potter has been cleared to see any prophecies pertaining to her personally, but she has not been cleared to see any other part of the Department."
And neither have you."

Heri decided beyond a doubt that she did not like this man. There were few characteristics that she disliked more in a person than patronisation, and he was already guilty of impoliteness, one of those few. Call her mad, but she would forgive outright evil before unrepentant incivility.

"Perfectly understandable," said Professor Dumbledore with a simple accepting nod.

Heri traced a forefinger over her top lip to hide her smirk. It was hard to be at odds with Professor Dumbledore when he made himself so easy for her to like.

The Unspeakable gave a curt jerk of his head in acknowledgement before leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

Heri heaved a sigh a few seconds later and took a moment to examine the room more closely. She noted there was a platter-like bowl on the table, sitting on a short pedestal. It looked much like the Pensieve Professor Dumbledore had used before, what with the runes carved all around the outside. Other than that though, the room was as austere as a prison cell. If she hadn't known this was the Department of Mysteries, she would have assumed she was in one of the interrogation rooms of the DMLE.

If it wasn't for the presence of her two professors and the unknown setting keeping her on guard, Heri would have already collapsed from the mind-numbing lack of stimulation to keep her grounded in the present. As it was, she had pulled an incomplete scarf from her Expanded pocket and was crocheting furiously under the table, forcing herself to focus on the physical activity to stave off any chance of a 'sleep' attack. She hadn't brought along Ollie that day because the poor dear was utterly terrified of Professor Snape, so it would have been double the headache if it ended up that she had to be revived, not to mention embarrassing beyond words because they would have to search her clothes for her potions.

She sort of wished that she could pull out Iolanthe as well to amuse herself, but the entire point of keeping the doll hidden was so that she would be taken seriously, something that was difficult enough to achieve given her age and lack of height. Iolanthe was an effective prop for when Heri wanted to be underestimated, but that wasn't the effect she needed right now.

After what seemed like a ridiculously long time considering they had made an appointment two weeks and a half in advanced and had been told that their time there was limited (she was tempted to flip the damned table from impatience), the door clicked and slowly swung open. Heri's eyes trained on the doorway sharply as a heavily cloaked figure with his face magically obscured like the first Unspeakable walked in with a black lacquered box the size of a briefcase floating in the air in front of him.

The box floated across the room and settled onto the end of the round table opposite of where Heri and the Headmaster were sitting. The Unspeakable followed behind, closing the door after him, and toot a seat in the one remaining chair around the table. He opened the box and turned it around so that it faced their direction.

Inside, sitting within cushions moulded to their size, was a faded scroll bound with a length of plain twine, and an opalescent sphere of spun glass that looked to be filled with swirling mist. The sphere had a tag attached to it, and Heri sharpened her eyes just a touch so she wouldn't have to lean forward and squint to read the small print as Professor Dumbledore was doing.

The tag read:
"I am Unspeakable Perthro-7-Alpha," the Unspeakable said, startling Heri after his prolonged silence. "You must remove the prophecy orb from the box and place it in the viewing receptacle."

"We're not here to view the prophecy," Professor Snape drawled, his expression tight with impatience. "We already know what it says. Miss Potter here will be taking it, as is her right."

"We apologise for taking up so much of your time for such a small matter," Professor Dumbledore tacked on.

The Head of the Prophetic Studies Division gave no protest or complaint, he merely inclined his head in acknowledgement.

"Miss Potter will be taking both prophecies?" He asked.

There was a pause at this.

"There's another prophecy?" Heri asked, her eyes wide with incredulity. "Since when?"

"Why was no one informed?" Snape added, scowling heavily.

The Unspeakable withdrew a scroll of parchment from his sleeve and appeared to look it over.

"The Prophetic Studies Division received the second prophecy concerning Miss Potter on November 2nd of 1981," he eventually said. "It was sent in by Elijah Podgarrulus, a particularly prolific prognosticator who has sent us several prophecies before and since. It was accounted to be about Miss Potter on May 4th of 1982. An owl was sent out to Miss Potter's guardians, but no response was received. After the fifth letter went unanswered, standard procedure dictated that no further attempts were to be made."

Professor Dumbledore looked troubled.

"The correspondence was undoubtedly received by Petunia," he told them, a slight frown on his face. "I placed a spell of redirection upon Heri so she would not be found by those who thought to trace an owl, but I neglected to do so for Ministry owls because that would have meant she would also not have received her school supply list when it was to come. Ministry officials came to me personally on matters concerning her, so I never realised it would be an issue either."

"So Petunia ended up with the letters and decided to throw them out?" Professor Snape clarified.

That certainly sounded like Aunt Petunia, Heri thought. No doubt she shrieked at discovering them and then burned them in the fireplace.

"It appears that way," Professor Dumbledore replied with a shrug.

"Should we listen to it now then?" asked Heri, looking from face to face.

"If you could tell us how?" said Dumbledore, addressing the Unspeakable.
Without a word, the Unspeakable pointed his wand at the scroll next to the prophecy orb and levitated it over to Heri.

"Why is this one not in an orb like the other one?" asked Professor Snape as Heri took the scroll and gave it a once over.

"This is a prognosticator's log," Heri answered in the Unspeakable's stead. "Unlike prophets or oracles, prognosticators aren't messengers for Higher Powers, they read the future through the flow of the world instead. And sometimes through whispers that they hear if they have clairaudience. Instead of speaking in a trance, they write down their predictions. And because a prognosticator's log has been divined from omens, it's sensitive to change, unlike 'true prophecies'."

Professor Snape did not look impressed.

"That batty wretch actually teaches useful information in that class of hers?" he asked, his tone scornful. Much like the majority of the Professors of Hogwarts, he had no respect for divination. With this scorn in consideration, it was amazing he had put enough stock into it at all to come along to retrieve the prophecy orb with them.

"Professor Trelawney may be a bit overexcited on occasion," Heri defended loyally, "But she knows her subject well."

"So we simply open it and read it?" asked Professor Dumbledore before Professor Snape could snipe back. The sneer on Professor Snape's face was very telling.

"Correct," the Unspeakable replied. "Though Miss Potter is the only one that may touch it."

"I see." Dumbledore nodded. He then smiled amicably at Heri. "Read it aloud then, my dear."

Heri unravelled the scroll and held it at a comfortable distance. She gave the words a cursory glance-over because of the length, and then began to read:

"Born of a splitting and split once more, twice-blessed is twice-born as the lightning strikes. As lightning strikes, the Darkness is illuminated; the Sun rises on the split path, showing a new way.

"When the Fire burns out, twice becomes thrice; when the Stone is cracked, it's all split in half; half born; half killed; half-blooded; half fulfilled. The Sun is halved and the Darkness rises once more.

"The sun enters Taurus with the moon in Gemini; thrice, once twice, becomes quadrice. Half a split; twice-blessed; thrice unmade; quadrice reformed. The split Sun burns out the Darkness to leave behind stars.

"Two times Two makes Four, but propagation needs more; four must find four for the Split to reach Four."

Heri paused after finishing, not sure where to begin. That certainly wasn't as straightforward as the one by Professor Trelawney. After a moment of thought, she latched onto the part that really confused her.

Wrinkling her nose, Heri asked, "What on earth is a 'quadrice'?"

Professor Dumbledore looked momentarily stupefied by her choice of a starting point, but then
chuckled a bit and sat back in his seat.

"A purely wizarding word, my dear," he informed her. "One that means 'four times.' After breaking off from the Muggles, it was decided by enthusiastic separatists that we should have words that could be called true 'Wizard's English.' Amongst those that were adapted, 'quadrice, quice, sexice, septice, octice, noveice, and deice' was decided to be used as continuation of the original 'once, twice, thrice' sequence."

Heri put her forefinger to her lips in contemplation.

"But that sequence comes from one, two, and three, in addition with the Old English genitive ending," she said after a moment. "Wouldn't it be more correct if it went along the lines of 'fource, fivice, sice, sevice, eightice, nince, and tence'?"

Professor Dumbledore hummed thoughtfully and nodded his head. He then said, "I can only suppose that the use of Latin roots is what made it wizardly in the eyes of the inventors. You learn about it in depth while studying for the History of Magic N.E.W.T."

"Is that so? How lovely."

Professor Snape looked at the two of them like they were both blithering idiots.

"Is this genuinely what you two want to be focusing on out of everything?"

"Well, no," Heri admitted. "But it wouldn't do me any favours if I didn't know the definitions of the words being used."

"There is never a bad time discuss etymological history, Severus," Dumbledore added. "It lends a deeper understanding of what is being stated, sometimes adding another dimension one would not expect when having a conversation."

"Never mind the etymology!" Professor Snape thundered. "We'd be better served figuring out where in this text it implies it has anything to do with the girl!"

The dour man looked over to the Unspeakable and began speaking rapidly.

"I can see a minor connection in the mention of lightning," he conceded, "That could very well be a reference to her scar. But nothing else stands out as a definite indication. How did you come to the conclusion this was about Potter? Did the seer mention it when it was sent in?"

"It was the determination of whom the prognostic was about that took the Prophetic Studies Division so long to decipher and then attempt to contact the recipient," the Unspeakable said monotonously. "The team that studied the prognostic eventually came to the supposition that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his forces are 'the Darkness,' and Miss Potter is 'the Sun.'"

"Beyond the fact that her scar is reminiscent of a lightning bolt, it is also in the exact design of sowilo, the rune of the sun. This, paired with her defeat of him leading to a major shift in the workings of our nation — a 'split path, showing a new way' — made it conclusive that it could be none other. The timing lends credence to this conclusion as well, the prognostic being made the day before You-Know-Who fell."

"And the rest of it?" Professor Snape asked.
"Inconclusive," was the response. "It's believed that this prophecy is currently in motion but is unfulfilled."

"'When the Fire burns out, twice becomes thrice'," Heri read out again. She looked to Professor Dumbledore. "The word 'fire' is capitalised in this instance, so maybe we should assume it's not an actual fire?"

"'When the Fire burns . . .'" the headmaster mumbled to himself. "' . . . the Sun is halved and the Darkness rises once more . . .'"

"Clearly this is referencing the Dark Lord being rebirthed," said Professor Snape, crossing his arms. "Though I don't understand the significance of the two middle lines of that verse."


"But what of 'twice becomes thrice'?" said Professor Snape.

"Well," said Professor Dumbledore as he patted his beard, "the previous verse said something of 'twice-blessed—'"

"'Twice-blessed is twice-born as the lightning strikes',' Heri read out again at the prompting.

She gave it a moment of thought.

"Mmm, I suppose this might be a reference to . . ." she trailed off as she glanced at the Unspeakable.

Now that she knew how wizards reacted to the confirmation that godborns were still amongst them, she was reluctant to even hint at it to anyone at all, never mind in the presence of an Unspeakable. The Department of Mysteries was a Ministry operation dedicated to research after all.

"Well, you know;" she then continued vaguely. "It's certainly a blessing in the most literal term of the word. So maybe it's saying I was blessed a second time that night, being metaphorically reborn — changed — from the baby I was before . . . and that I was blessed yet again so that . . . erm . . . so that I survived the Tournament, perhaps?"

"Logical," Professor Dumbledore said with an agreeable nod. "And the next line with 'the Stone' . . ." he faltered a moment before recovering. "Yes, I think we all know what I believe that is."

"And then it just describes me for a line," Heri murmured, not acknowledging the previous statement. She then said, "I suppose it's nice to confirm that I was only half killed," in an attempt to divert Professor Snape's dark look.

She then hummed and read, "'The sun enters Taurus with the moon in Gemini' . . . I'm not sure if this is supposed to be a reference to a significant date or . . . hmm, a reassurance maybe . . . ?" she mused. "A change for greater earthly happiness during a time of positive innovation . . ."

"More nuggets of wisdom from the supremely competent Trelawney?" Professor Snape sneered.

"The centaurs actually, sir," Heri easily answered, sending the man a challenging look. "Astrology is their forte, and they're quite happy to help me with my assignments on the matter. Anyway," she said looking back to the scroll, "this happens when what was once two, but is now
three, becomes four . . .? No, it's because of the change that it's . . .”

"Would it be correct to assume that it's being implied that the current situation will be resolved in our favour?" asked Professor Dumbledore, a slight smile on his lips. "Divination has never been one of my strengths," he admitted. "It's a relief to know you are so well educated in contrast, my dear."

"It's my pleasure, sir," Heri replied politely, exchanging a small smile with the old man. "From what I can tell, it sounds like things will get better, and then . . . I'll be blessed again? I believe that's what it's saying. I've been blessed three times already and it'll be happening again."

"It says 'twice-blessed; thrice unmade'," said Professor Snape, "When have you ever been 'unmade', Potter?"

Heri flapped a hand dismissively.

"It's just another way of saying I've been changed, sir," she told him. "Obviously, if I've been blessed, I'm no longer what I was before, thus being 'reformed' as it says here. And when it happens again, it'll help us take down the other side!"

"The split Sun burns out the Darkness to leave behind stars," Professor Snape read out in an attempt to poke holes in her conclusion. "What is 'split' about you?"

Heri and Professor Dumbledore exchanged glances, pointedly not looking at the Unspeakable.

"I think," the Headmaster said carefully, "we would be correct to assume that that particular descriptive is a yet another reference to Heri's . . . condition."

"And the next part?" Professor Snape demanded, relentless. "Two times Two makes Four, but propagation needs more; four must find four for the Split to reach Four? That hardly makes a bit of sense!"

"Well . . ." hedged Heri. It wasn't like she could know everything by herself! "That's actually the vaguest part of this whole passage. It could mean a lot of things really. But this prophecy is obviously only half completed at most, so it's likely referencing things that we just don't have the information yet to understand, professor."

Professor Snape harrumph'd grouchily but did not refute her statement.

Further discussion trickled off after this initial take on interpreting the prognostic, a timely thing as well because they were soon escorted out. More or less true to his word, the Unspeakable from before came to collect them only twenty minutes after they met the head of the Prophetic Studies Division. Returning the prophecies to their places, the division head handed the lacquered box to Heri as he left them behind without even a word of farewell.

"Your time is up," said Unspeakable Mannaz-2-Theta, his tone impatient. "I will return you now."

Being ushered back to the office they had originally arrived in, Heri mentally crossed out Unspeakable from her list of possible career options. The opportunity for fascinating research aside, the people themselves were reprehensible.

In the days after retrieving the prophecies from the Department of Mysteries, Heri had the oddest
feeling of being watched. Admittedly, being watched was not an uncommon occurrence considering how she was almost constantly in the presence of her friends and family or with her semi-sentient experiments, but there was an extra pair of eyes she could feel that she couldn't pinpoint. Whether accompanied or supposedly by herself, she could feel someone looking.

If she was rough-housing with Sirius, there were invisible eyes peering around the corners; if she was tinkering in her room, something was looking out at her from underneath her bed; no matter where she went, it followed her. Heri was tempted to fling a knife out at whatever it was whenever she felt its presence, but she didn't want to risk it gaining a weapon on the off-chance it could dodge her blade. That and throwing knives wasn't a trait that was encouraged in a civilised environment; she tried not to do that outside of her room any longer, and rekindling the habit would have been a liability with how potentially explosive her room now was.

No one else had noticed it, making her wonder if it was one of those things only the godly could see. Granted, no one in the house was as paranoid as her — besides Mad-Eye, but he wasn't around that often — but Heri would have thought that the feel of staring eyes and strangely moving shadows would concern others as well. Zacharias and Ernie didn't seem to be aware of it either, but she chalked that up to being because they lived pretty pampered lives and weren't intrinsically combat-oriented like she seemed to be.

If she was the type to point fingers, she would have blamed Hedwig. After the troublesome bird had returned from a hunt, the whatever-it-was started lurking. Heri knew there were things in this world outside of her comprehension, but she had figured that Hedwig was just a confusing but relatively well-meaning part of it. This was apparently not the case, since she was now oh-so-carelessly bringing home supernatural beings of unknown intentions, not caring in the least bit that this was not okay.

Blasted amoral familiars.

Heri had considered telling Sirius and Remus, but . . . well, they had enough worries and stress without scaring themselves silly over a matter they couldn't do anything about. They had been running themselves ragged on Order business, schmoozing up to potential allies and coordinating with other Order members every other day. The thing had gotten in the building despite the protections that could very well endure an apocalypse; if the house hadn't kept it out, nothing would.

It was on the day before she returned to school that Heri decided that enough was enough. She had concluded the presence was not an active threat when it hadn't done more than trail after her, but there was no way she was allowing it to follow her to Hogwarts. She had her limits, and letting an unknown entity with equally unknown powers within reach of the schoolchildren who were more or less under her protection was that limit.

Heri had been measuring up Ollie for a new jumper, Iolanthe darting back and forth to bring her tools from her sewing kit, when the shadow under her work desk thickened. Immediately irritated, a tendril lanced out, sharpened to a wicked point.

It struck with a crshlnk! but Heri couldn't tell if she'd landed a proper hit or if she had just struck wall; the tendrils registered touch differently than the rest of her body. The only thing she knew for certain was that she was lodged in for the length of her hand. Another spear-like tendril went blurring when Heri discerned a hint of movement.

In the back of her mind, Heri was relieved that Sirius and Remus were currently out on 'business'. It would have been nice to have back up if things ended up going sour, but she was resolute to not involve them with the things that sought her out for being what she was. Since she learned how
much poor little Alabaster Torrington's family had suffered from such things, she wanted to keep her own family as far away from the dangers as possible.

"I know you're still there," Heri bit out. She felt her pupils and irises expanding. "Come out where I can see you."

The shadow shifted in place like clay being moulded, but it made no response.

"I've had quite enough of this game of chase!" Heri snapped, sprouting another tendril and sharpening it threateningly. "Show yourself and tell me what you want!"

As she said this, Heri picked up Ollie and settled the bogle on her hip. Meanwhile, Iolanthe eep'd and skittered up into the Expanded pocket Heri had sewn on all of her skirts. With her miniature doppelgänger safely hidden, she could focus on Ollie's safety. Ollie had not known about the strange stalker before this moment, and she was now trembling up a storm in confusion and fright, her rabbit-like nose twitching furiously.

The shadowy form under the desk twitched and churned as if it was indecisive, but it soon began creeping forward when Heri's third tendril sprouted needle-like protrusions similar to the spines on a manticore's tail. As it inched out, Heri kept her tendrils tensed for action.

It bubbled outward when it reached the edge of the natural shadows, surging up like a cloud of noxious smoke. As it poured out, it thickened from mist to a heavy-looking smog, billows spinning in a tight rotation to form thick appendages. After a moment, it condensed into a silhouetted figure of a man.

It then blinked open hellish eyes. The entire surface of its eyes was overwhelmed by the blackness of pupil, and what should have been pink waterline was a sheen of pus green. As it took in Heri's wary face, details bled up from its feet, turning it from a black outline into a fully three-dimensional being.

Heri said nothing as it completed its strange metamorphosis into anthropomorphic form.


Heri bounced the small creature gently, making soft sounds of comfort even as she kept her eyes trained on the threat, her tendrils coiled and ready. She didn't like this at all; not only was it out of the ordinary, it felt out of the ordinary as well. Her senses screamed at her that this being was not to be taken lightly.

The whatever-it-was cocked its head, expression wondering.

It was taller than any humanoid being she had ever seen besides Hagrid, well over six feet, maybe even seven or so, but lanky like a teenage boy. It wore tidy black dreadlocks coiled on the top of its head. The facial features were vaguely Asiatic, but its skin was a coppery brown with a strange undertone Heri reckoned was green, if the greenish waterline was any indication. If it wasn't for the inhuman colour undertone and eyes, it would have looked to be a rather exotic but otherwise ordinary wizard.

"Sc-scary man," Ollie continued, confusing leaking into her tone. "Scary man has eyes like Miss Heri!"

Heri stiffened, even her tendrils freezing in their undulating.
Eyes like . . . ? Those eerie puddles of tar were what Heri's eyes looked like when they were at optimal vision range? She searched the thing's face for any sign of reaction at Ollie's declaration, but it looked completely unsurprised. But why would they be similar in this way? Heri had gotten her eyes from her lately absent guardian spirit, it shouldn't be a trait that was shared with other sorts of beings!

"Who are you?" Heri demanded, her tone sharp and impatient as her thoughts abounded. They shouldn't be alike in that way! Why would they be alike? Heri's eyes were a godly gift—!

And then a thought struck her.

"Are you . . . ?" she continued almost breathlessly before the thing could answer. "Are you . . . my father?"

Was this the third parent she had so long wanted to know? Could he be? If it was so, she was a little disappointed at how . . . not underwhelming, but . . . ungodly he was. She had heard grand tales of how mortal eyes were burned out if they looked on a god, but this creature . . .

The thing's eyes widened at her question. It then dropped to one knee and bowed its head.

"Dear lady mine," it — he rasped in a creaky voice that would've better suited an elderly gentleman on his last leg. "This humble servant would beg your pardon. 'Twas mine intention not to lead you to credit this mere messenger to be your lofty lord father. In sooth, I was stricken dumb at sudden being called forth to attend to you after such a length wherein I went unacknowledged. I implore you forgive this miserable sinner this grievous fault."

He spoke with a peculiar accent Heri couldn't identify, the odd lilting of it making his strangely antiquated speech pattern sound even more out of place.

So he did have something to do with her father! Oh, and wasn't it exciting to know for certain that it was a father instead of just an indeterminable parent? Still, this meant this person was definitely on the higher scale of danger, nothing within godly influence was harmless.

Heri's eyes narrowed into a sceptical squint. She drew back her tendrils so they weren't right in the strange man's face any longer, but instead were drifting around her sides like a physical aura. He had not yet lifted his head again, but he did twitch almost imperceptibly when a tendril nearly grazed him.

"Who are you?" she asked again, harshness gone but still firm. "Why are you here? And what do you know about my father?"

He lifted his head and assumed a straightened posture, but he remained on his knee and didn't look her in the eyes.

"This servant is an ambassador of the realm of your exalted lord father," He said. "I am but a messenger bearing his lordship's missive for my lady to accept at her leisure. I was charged to hie hither and relay his intentions to you."

In times of uncertainty, it was best to behave confidently lest the opposition takes advantage of your weakness. Heri fisted her free hand on her hip and gave him a derisive once-over. She channelled all her self-confidence and pretended this was Dudley before her.

So, if this man's words were to be taken at face value, her father was some god that had control
over a 'realm'. If that was true, why hadn't he sent anyone to her before? And who the Hell did he think he was to have a child and then just leave that child an orphan at the mercies of people that despised her?

"I didn't know delivering a message had anything to do with following a person around like a hungry bogeyman on the prowl," she said, unimpressed by this 'messenger' and her supposedly lordly father.

He bowed his head again.

"I pray you grant me mercy, Mistress," he said. "Being unacknowledged as I was, I ill favoured encroaching on your attentions while you were otherwise diverted."

Heri eyed him doubtfully and asked, "Are you saying you've been hanging around like a lingering ghost because I didn't call you out the first time I noticed you?"

"To otherwise approach you without your expressed permission 'twould be unseemly of me, my lady."

Right. Of course it was. Never mind that Heri knew nothing of his archaic manners and so hadn't realised he was waiting for such a signal.

Carefully putting Ollie back down, Heri asked, "How did you even know where to find me? Not even my guardian spirit has been able to reach me in this house."

This was something that had both shocked and awed Heri when she had realised it. The spirit was usually stood under some tree outside a window when she had looked for it before. When she hadn't seen it back when she had returned from Massachusetts, she had sprinted out to the nearest park and shaken the spirit down for answers when it appeared. When it had told her that the wards on Number 12 deflected even divine tracking, Heri concluded the house to be the safest place in the world for her.

It was highly unsettling that something had managed to slip in.

He considered his words for a moment.

"I' faith, I was ill-equipped to progress to my lady's abode through mine own means," he said at length. "Yet e're could I surrender to my bitter resolve to seek out you at your place of learning, I was set upon by a beast most fearsome in the make of a monstrous fowl. Anon I learned this beast to be my lady's own creature, and it spake with me. Unto me it disclosed that much liken to a letter am I, being that the message I carry lieth upon my tongue rather than in written word. It then conveyed that it was obliged to bear me to my lady as it would any other correspondence."

*Dammit, Hedwig.*

Heri had known it was all the silly bird's fault! Next she'd been inviting Voldemort over for croquet and Christmas dinner!

"So you were delivered to my doorstep like a stray sheet of parchment," Heri summarised sardonically, crossing her arms. She sighed gustily through her nose and glanced around at the mess of fabric she had strewn across her room. This really wasn't the place to be having such a conversation.
"Ollie, dear," said Heri, placing a hand on the small creature's head who had been fiddling with the hem of Heri's shirt since she had been placed on the ground. "Would you be a gem and go tell Oona that I'd like tea for three to be sent to the third-floor sitting room?"

Ollie glanced nervously at the third person in the room before giving Heri a wobbly smile and saying, "Yes, Miss Heri!"

Ollie then skirted around the still kneeling man and dashed out of the room.

"We're going to the sitting room so you can explain yourself properly," Heri informed the man, her tone patently pleasant.

She was no longer in any mood for more delicately put words. Her sanctuary had been invaded, her father had sent a stalker, and the guy was still speaking in pretty little phrases that didn't actually tell her anything. Heri pasted Smile No. 9 onto her face, a jolly curving of eyes and a saccharine bearing of teeth reserved for people who were standing on her last nerve but weren't allowed to know it.

"Please, get up," she chirped. "This conversation is long overdue, and I'd like to be sitting comfortably while I wring you out bone-dry for every little bit of information you're good for."

It was a spooked otherworldly being who trailed after Heri to 'her' sitting room, who was then pushed into a chair across from her when he protested on grounds of 'impropriety'. Heri stared him into submission when he shifted uncomfortably, and they sat in silence until the tea arrived.

"How do you take your tea, sir?" Heri then asked perfunctorily, calmly pouring the liquid through the strainer and into the cup meant for her guest. She had pulled in her tendrils, but her eyes were still at optimum range.

He observed her cautiously as he answered, "An it please my lady, but a trickle of cream be well enow."

Heri nodded amicably and handed him his cup after adding the aforementioned cream.

"Now," said Heri as she began fixing a cup for Ollie who was snuggled into her side again. "I want your name and your purpose. In full detail, if you please."

With a deep nod of his head, he said, "An it please you, madam, I am Namtar, Grand Vizier of The Land of No Return. I come bearing gifts and salutations from His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Nergal of the Netherworlds, the Furious One, Devourer of the flesh of Man, Judge of Souls, for his beloved firstborn child, Her Exalted Eminence, Lady Herakles of the Houses of Potter and Black, by the Providence of All Creation, First Imperial Princess of the Netherworlds***."

There was a beat — a moment just long enough that Heri wondered if her heart had stopped.

What?

Heri was not too prideful to deny that she nearly dropped the cup in her hand. As it was, tea sloshed over the edge of the cup, and the teapot in her other hand returned to the table with a very telling clink-thwk, too loud to be discreet in the silence following the previous statement.

Wait, no! Just . . . but . . .

No, seriously — what? The extra fluff could be ignored for now, because —
"Nergal?" she breathed, voice barely above a hush. She flicked out her wand and dried off her dampened gloves. A touch of hysteria entered her tone as she said again, "Nergal? Nergal, the destructive aspect of the sun? Nergal, the evil Mesopotamian god of war, pestilence, and famine? The warmongering god known to be more bloodthirsty than even Lord Ares? THAT NERGAL?!

Her voice grew progressively louder until she was positively shrieking at the end.

Nergal! That was what he'd said, right? She hadn't gone momentarily insane and started hearing things?

She was spasming internally at the thought.

Of all gods, how was it possible that her father was him?

Heri had read about Nergal when she was in the Restricted Section of the school library in search of material for her history project last year. He was written about in a book she had found dropped in a cranny between a chair and a bookshelf, a book on katotheurgy, the channelling of Dark gods. Always wanting to know more about gods, she had actually given herself another day with her Time-Turner so that she could read it all in one sitting.

Nergal was a second-generation god of the Sumerian-Babylonian pantheon, the chief centre of his cult being in Kutha, currently an archaeological site in modern-day Iraq. In later records, he was described as a 'destroying flame' and earned the epithet sharrapu, 'burner'. Assyrian documents of the 1st millennium BC described him as a benefactor of men, who hears prayers and restores the dead to life, but those were muggle records; hymns older that — known only to wizards — depicted him as a god of pestilence, hunger, and devastation.

Heri could remember well the chill that crept up her spine when she read the invocation meant to summon him from his realm. She couldn't remember the entire thing, but there were a few lines that stuck out: Nergal, god of the Sacrifice of Blood, remember!/Devourer of the flesh of Man, remember!/Spirit of the Entrance Unto Death, open Thy Gate to me!

A god that was more feared than worshipped by even his own cult was her father.

It didn't make sense! It didn't fit at all! The others at school were dead convinced that she was far too . . . well, alright, she knew she was little trigger-happy, but that was easily attributed to outside circumstance instead of an inborn trait! The aura around her was described as 'too comfortable' for her to be the daughter of anyone but a domestic deity! NERGAL WAS A GOD OF DEATH AND KILLING! What's more, Nergal didn't even have any history of fathering any children, never mind godborns!

Namtar winced at Heri's words and expression.

"I pray you, my lady," he said, looking mightily uncomfortable. "Judge not your lord father so harshly. His lordship be a stringent master, yet fair is he in all his dealings. A better ruler I cannot name."

"So you're saying he's not evil?" Heri demanded, fingers digging into the material of her skirt at her thighs. Her knuckles were white from how tightly her fingers were clenched.

"I know not wherefore ye are inclined to such a thought," he replied, honest confusion on his face.

Heri gave him a disbelieving look.
Even before finding that book, she had heard of Nergal. Eddie Carmichael had been eager to fill her ears with his knowledge of all things divine, something none of the other children at school had been too excited to hear about. Heri had once again proved herself a patient listener and had been rewarded with answers to questions she hadn't even known to ask.

Nergal, originally named Meslamtæa, was a son of Enlil and Ninlil, the sky-god king of the Anunnaki and the goddess of the south wind respectively. The Anunnaki were first worshipped during the late Hyborian Age, around 10,000 BC, but gained prominence after the Great Cataclysm, when the continents shifted and Atlantis sunk into the sea. They had a great impact on the rise of the Sumerian Empire, one of the first great human civilisations to rise from the ashes of the Hyborian Age, during which they were at their height of worship. The Anunnaki are therefore counted among the oldest gods known on earth with the possible exception of the Ogdoad, the ancestors of the gods of Egypt.

Nergal represented a very particular aspect of death, one that was often interpreted as inflicted death, because Nergal was also the god of plague and pestilence, as well as being closely associated with warfare. Death brought on by Nergal also had a strongly supernatural dimension, even more so than gods of other pantheons, because of the various diseases of Mesopotamia. He controlled a variety of demons and hellish forces, most notoriously the ilû sebettu, his agents of death and destruction.

As Meslamtæa, he was the god of war of the Sumerian Empire during the time they conquered and subjugated their enemies, but when he tried to conquer the underworld of Irkalla ruled by Ereškigal, he became known as a darker, more malevolent deity known as Nergal. Rather than cede control of Irkalla to Nergal, Ereškigal took him as her consort, merging their two realms of the dead, Allatun and Irkalla, together. Even then, Nergal rarely stayed bound to the netherworlds, spawning war and blood-thirst on earth instead, leading mortals and gods against their enemies.

Even when his father and uncle, Enlil and Hadad, went to war against each other to become king of the Anunnaki, Nergal gave no partiality between, instead he supported both brothers equally, preferring the bloodshed of battle over everything else. Nergal was called Assur as the patron god of the later Assyrian Empire, usurping the worship of Anshar, an older deity. He was called Erra by the Akkadians and once tried to eradicate the entirety of mankind on the coaxing the ilû sebettu, actually killing people indiscriminately in Babylon before he later changed his mind on a whim.

Eventually, most of the Mesopotamian gods retreated to the other dimensional realm of Celestial Dilmun that Anu created when he was exiled from earth centuries before, but Nergal instead remained within the netherworlds. Following the fall of the Assyrian Empire, most of Mesopotamia either fell under control of the Greeks — and later the Romans — and adopted their gods, or were converted into Judaism, Islam, and eventually Christianity.

Despite being bound to the netherworlds, Nergal often joined the other Anunnaki in war, especially against the Olympian gods and their worshippers who were invading the lands that were once Ancient Sumeria, and against the Yazatas, the gods worshipped by the Persians of Ancient Iran. Lord Ares — the Olympian god of war — once tried to turn Nergal into an ally against Hecules, the brother Ares hated, but he was overwhelmed by Nergal as well, and begrudgingly had to work with Hercules to send Nergal back to the netherworlds.

At this time, Nergal's modern activities were unknown, but he was remembered to be a very impatient and violent deity given to psychopathic rages.

Not exactly someone you’d want as a father.

It was all this that Heri explained to Namtar, who looked on, gobsmacked. Apparently, he hadn't
known that their history was still remembered. In fact, he hadn't known that many parts of her description had been known by mortals at all.

"And if all that wasn't enough," Heri sighed, taking a deep sip of tea, "I was convinced for the longest time that I was Olympian! They're the most common type of godborns, you know — it was a logical conclusion. An Anunnaki godborn hasn't been known of since the writings of the Epic of Gilgamesh, and that was written thousands of years ago!"

"This revelation doth trouble you?" Namtar asked, looking discouraged. "'Tis truth such a birth be rarer than horse feathers, yet should this not inspire merriment rather than despair?"

"I have nothing against him personally, but that doesn't mean I can't be shocked that a god with such a bad reputation is supposed to be my father," Heri retorted, handing Ollie a biscuit she had been reaching for. "He's literally the exact opposite of what I was hoping for! And I'm allowed to be bothered when something I believed to be true for so long turns out to be false!"

"I beg your pardon, my lady, what hath proven itself to be false?"

Heri frowned and said, "Weren't you listening just now? I said I thought I was Olympian!"

Namtar looked as confused as ever.

"Is't not so?" he asked, voice hesitant. "Yea, I believe this to be truth."

Now it was Heri's turn to be confused, not that she hadn't already been confused in some form or another since the start of this conversation.

"Lord Nergal never integrated with the Olympian gods!" Heri protested. She definitely would have heard of that from Carmichael even if she hadn't during primary school Latin. "He's always been Anunnaki!"

"Aye, my lady speaketh the truth," Namtar replied, inclining his head. "Yet not Lord Nergal do I describe but your lady mother."

"..."

What?

When Heri's mouth actually fell open, Namtar expounded.

"Though the reason be not known to me, Lord Nergal was invoked within your ladyship's infancy by your mortal father," he said. "'Tis believed that my lord was meant to defeat the foe of your mortal father in his stead. Alas, Lord Nergal was pulled forth too late to do more than observe the aftermath."

Heri was now having trouble breathing. Would these plot-twists stop coming out of nowhere!?

"Amongst the ashes and dead did he find you," Namtar continued, "trapped within your mortal body as it did fail from your divinity being released prematurely. Your ladyship was killing herself — an immortal soul with no jurisdiction dissolveth into Nothingness outside of a physical vessel. Ye would have not only been dead as any other mortal, ye would have been erased from existence.

"Lord Nergal did witness your plight and did admire how ye yet lingered when any other would have succumbed the moment their vessel did falter. With the power of the sacrifice your mortal father
made, Lord Nergal did pluck you from your vessel and did remake it with his own flesh and powers."

"Wait!" Heri exclaimed when Namtar looked as if he was about to continue without granting his previous words the appropriate gravity. "Why would he do that? What made him even consider doing such a thing?"

"Lord Nergal is not without compassion," Namtar said almost rebukingly. "And he certainly honoureth his debts. Your mortal father did give sacrifice without receiving gain; providing assurance that the one he did sacrifice for did continue to live to a length worthy of payment of a life cut short was fair and equal exchange. And did ye not provoke the respect of Lord Nergal with your own strength of will? Nay, 'tis little wonder my lord did exalt you as his own child."

"So you say!" Heri scoffed, still wide-eyed and disbelieving. "Where does my mother come into this?"

"Upon your rebirth, your lady mother was beside herself with both shock and relief. An you yet not know it to be so, the Olympians have been decreed to have no close relation to their mortal offspring. It is forbidden of them to raise their halfborns. Your lady mother did sense a disturbance in your presence and did come to look into your well-being despite the law against her participation. She was most offended that another had made themselves to be a parent as she could not be, yet upon discovering ye were rescued from the edge of expiry she did grow most grateful."

"Who is she?" Heri inquired, leaning forward in her seat. "How is any of that even possible? How can a godborn have two divine parents?"

"I regret to say I may not reveal her to you," Namtar replied, sounding genuinely remorseful. "Pantheons must respect the laws of others when it comes to mortals, and it is so that my lady mayn't know her lady mother afore she reveals herself. In sooth, it would be a hazardous undertaking, for she would not goeth unpunished for intervening so directly."

"Fine," Heri conceded eventually. She had already known that Olympian godborns had to wait for their parents to show themselves, she was just getting irritated of waiting. "But how is it possible for a godborn to have two divine parents? Wouldn't two gods make another god?"

Why had no one told her about this possibility?

"Lord Nergal did not divest you of your mortality when he made you anew," Namtar explained. "Ye are now simply what is known as a Twice-Blessed."

Heri really did drop her teacup this time. Thankfully, Ollie managed to catch it before it fell to the ground.

"Repeat that?"

Namtar gave her a bewildered look and said, "Ye are what is known as a Twice-Blessed."

_Born of a splitting and split once more, twice-blessed is twice-born as the lightning strikes._

Thinking of those first two lines with this new definition in mind made it make a lot more sense. Heri just sat back in her seat and fell into momentary contemplation.

So, being 'blessed' referred to the number of divine parents she had, not how many times she had lucked out. If that was true, that meant—
"Is it possible to be *thrice* blessed?" Heri asked.

Namtar paused and thought on this for a moment.

"In sooth, I think it ne'er afore to have been done," he said at last. "I do not say it to be impossible, yet the only way it could be so would be another deity made you their Champion. Being made a Champion is whereby most other godlings become twice-blessed, though I have yet to hear word of one already twice-blessed being made Champion."

Here was a possibility she hadn't known. If the second prophecy meant what she now thought it meant, she'd be looking at a major boost in . . . whatever it was being 'blessed' gave her very soon. She should probably tell Professors Dumbledore and Snape about it later.

I see," she murmured, picking up a biscuit. "So, my father is Lord Nergal, Mesopotamian god of the netherworlds, amongst other things, and my mother is an Olympian goddess who can't afford to reveal herself to me just yet. I suppose that would explain the guardian spirit, my general oddity, and the tendrils. I've really wondered about the tendrils, you know; the Olympians have nothing like them."

Heri paused in thought. Then she frowned.

"Actually, come to think of it, Lord Nergal isn't accounted to have tendrils either!"

Namtar twitched at the mention of her tendrils. Heri had drawn them in, but it seemed he was sensitive to even the thought of them.

"Dearest lady mine," he began, expression becoming soft and beseeching. Heri assumed he was going to ask her not to remind him of them. "Would you be so generous as to . . . That is to say . . . might I see your tenacula once more?"

Heri blinked.

"What?"

It seemed she'd be repeating that word quite often today. It was understandable of course, what with so many things being said that she would have never expected. No one but the centaurs had ever asked her to see her tendrils again before. Granted, the only other people that had seen them before were either dead or had been threatened with them, but still.

She then wrinkled her nose and said, "What did you call them?"

"Tenacula, my lady," Namtar answered, looking abashed. "None but Lord Nergal hath tenacula of such fury that they form themselves into such deathly fashion!"

His embarrassment faded as he grew impassioned.

Eyes bright and breathing increased, he said, "And lovelier a set I have never yet seen! Not even the most winsome of the netherworld maidens I have been acquainted with can compare! My lady's fair limbs are like the blooming bramble: with impunity do they strike, thorns sharp to taste blood, yet graceful are they in the motion of their blows! Their comeliness inviteth the touch, though he who reacheth out doth know he reacheth for death. In sooth, death would be a meagre trade to know the touch of such beauteous barbs!"

Eyes wide with alarm, cheeks as red as if she'd been slapped, she blurted, "Are you some kind of pervert?"
Trust her to have a father that sends a weirdo with a tentacle fetish to talk to her! Were the appendages somehow sexual to them? If so, why was he acquainted with her father's? From the look on his face, one would have thought she'd been waving around a pair of knickers!

Namtar came out of his raptures with a chagrined smile, but his face was flushed and was adorned with a dopey expression she had seen on Ernie and Zacharias whenever they were talking about 'guy stuff' when they thought the girls and she couldn't hear them. It was strange to see this look on a grown man who looked like he should be a villain in a fantasy film, but Heri had seen it often enough to know that was look worn when thinking about naughty things.

"I'm sixteen, you paedophile," she hissed, face hot with blushing, not knowing how to feel. She tucked Ollie more firmly into her side. "And there's a child here!"

"I beg pardon for my forwardness, my lady," Namtar said coyly, poking his forefingers together. "Your beauty did overcome my senses. But comprehension escapeth me on the reasoning of you denouncing me as a peruser of children. My lady hath been of marriageable age since the turn of her thirteenth year, and hath been a woman since she did triumph over the dragon that did challenge her."

Heri blinked rapidly, trying to catch up with his train of thought.

"Excuse me?" she exclaimed. "The age of consent is fifteen amongst British wizards, and our age of majority is seventeen! I'm still considered a child!"

"Is't so?" said Namtar, alien eyes peering up from under his lashes. "A thousand apologies for my trespass then, my lady. I have not involved myself in the workings of mortal conventions since the rise of the Olympians, and amongst the people of Sumer adulthood did come when one proved themselves in battle under the judgement of witnesses."

"I suppose I can understand your ignorance," Heri allowed grudgingly, "but it is absolutely not right to make such suggestions! Certainly not in a public setting, certainly not when you've just met someone, and certainly not when there are impressionable children around to hear them!"

"Ollie," she addressed the little bogle who had been looking on curiously when she noted Heri's outrage, "go finish your tea with Oona and then head off to bed. We'll finish your jumper on the train tomorrow."

They sat in silence as Ollie trotted off as she was told.

"You say you are but a child yourself," Namtar eventually said, "yet you coddle that creature with all the tender doting of a seasoned matron."

"I've always done well with little children," Heri admitted, resolving to ignore his latter statement. "Even when they were only a few months younger than me and I had just grown out of toddling myself."

"The influence of you lady mother I should think," he replied pensively. He hummed. "Or rather not — she hath not influence over any facet of child-rearing as I know it to be. Perhaps this be a trait unique unto yourself."

The pervy smile returned.

"A good wife you would make. An affectionate one for certain. Oh, were such tender affection gifted upon me . . ."
"Stop that!" Heri cried, hopelessly flustered. She felt inclined to chuck her cup at him. "Does my father know you're like this?"

Namtar paled dramatically, an odd accomplishment considering his dark skin.

"I pray you, my lady," he croaked, "do not make this known to your lord father. He is mostly unconcerned by my free ways, yet I know not how he would act an he knew I did relapse within your presence. Just is he, yet I would like it not to once again know the hot side of his temper."

"Is he really that bad?" she asked, impressed despite herself. She was starting to see the benefits of having a frightening father.

Namtar shuddered and said, "My lord is not a wicked god, but his rages be renowned for good reason."

"I suppose you should keep that in mind while explaining where the . . . tenacula are from then. As I said, Lord Nergal isn't known to have any, nor do any other Mesopotamian gods. Not by any human accounts anyway."

Namtar sighed wistfully but answered dutifully. "It is of utmost import that my lady understandeth that the Anunnaki take physical form by pressing our presence upon a substance. In days of old, we did press upon Man and animal, those of willing spirit to host our presence and eventually surrender their essence and vessel to us. The vessels would then be consumed and made part of our being. Lesser netherworld beings would live for the chase of vessels, hoping to consume more and more to grow powerful."

Huh. That reminded Heri of what had happened when she had accidentally eaten Professor Binns. She had gotten better in history after that . . . She supposed it was because Professor Binns didn't have a physical body that she hadn't had to 'possess' him to consume him. This knowledge now made her morbiderly curious as to what else she could gain if she ate more of the ghosts at school.

"During his wanderings of the world in search of worthy wars," Namtar continued on, "Lord Nergal did come to possess a monstrous sea beast from out of the depths of the ocean, what I have heard called 'Kraken' in this language. This form did please my lord, and he did make it part of his main embodiment in response. I wonder how my lady hath never heard word of this occurrence as Lord Nergal hath been sighted by mortals on several occasions when he did arise from the depths with the Kraken as his head and his body a mix of Man and dragon."

Was he saying that Nergal was Cthuhlu? Or rather that Cthulhu had actually been Nergal dressing up as an eldritch abomination? Was this a thing that was actually happening right now?

It seemed that Snape had been partially correct before in his commentary of Heri's vestigial limbs. Heri stared blankly into her cup and resolved to think happy thoughts instead.

The conversation eventually drifted into safer territory, about the Anunnaki and the interaction with other pantheons. It seemed that most of the older pantheons had done something similar to the Anunnaki as time passed and their religions became less known, moving into a separate realm of existence. Namtar spoke of it grimly, the most serious Heri had see him since they had started talking.

"The time of the Anunnaki hath been long pass. As the other religions so eagerly did overscribe our creation tales with their own fables, stealing our triumphs and degrading our accomplishments, the modern Man did forget our existence until only recently. Within the time between, the lesser gods have faded, both from memory and existence."
"Faded?" Heri echoed tentatively, sensitive to the man's sombre expression.

"With the rise of younger gods and the formation of new civilisations, those amongst us that did not retreat to Dilmun have cometh less, their consciousness returning to the Nothingness from whence they did come," he explained. "Their reach was too short; their influence reduced to insignificance. Lord Nergal is unique, his fingers dip within the wells of numerous dominions, all which he remaineth the Major God of, yet this was not so for numerous deities. Were it not for my own jurisdiction being one no Man may ever deny, even I would have become Nothingness long ago."

"Why?" Heri asked, disturbed at the thought. "I thought gods were immortal. How could they just die like that?"

Namtar sighed.

"Those of us that were not once Man were brought into existence from thought and belief. As thoughts did stray and beliefs did shift, their powers did decrease and eventually did disappear. Without their animating force, they did become unmade once more.

"We are not composed altogether of flesh and blood. We have shape, but that shape was not made of matter. This is true of all gods, but especially the eldest of us. When the stars were right, the Anunnaki did plunge from world to world through the sky. Often did we witness Beginnings and Endings of far-off universes. From world to world did we journey, to eventually settle in this dimension. We did lead the people; we did teach them our gifts. Alas, we did plant too deeply and did allow ourselves to forget what it was like Before. And now the Lesser of us have perished — the punishment of forgetting.

"Yet although we no longer live, we shall never truly die. Gods fade into Nothingness and become reborn anew. Already it hath occurred, and they have joined with the younger gods to form the newer pantheons. Some yet remember though most have no memory of it. And why should they? Their purpose was lost and they were pulled back into the Void until they were re-imagined for new purpose, some even with new jurisdictions.

"All the while, the eldest of us yet remain, slumbering within our realms and sanctuaries. Worshippers rename us and paint us with new faces, but these modern-day priests remember yet what the Anunnaki have always been: the Great Old Ones who did live ages before there were any Men, and who came to the young world out of the sky.

"The Olympians know not how fortunate they be," he said, tone tingeing with bitterness. "I amend; they know yet give it little thought. From Heaven and Earth, and Magic and Flesh were they formed, and from this gallimaufry did come a resilience to diminishing, a trait any amongst my kinsmen would treasure above the riches of a king's ransom. Though their powers may decline, naught but the End of All Things will cause their true end.

"But I envy them not," he declared hotly. "When the time cometh, it shall no longer be this god nor another subverting territory and raining down their fury, it will be all things succumbing to what they did long deny: Death, the domain of we minor gods, but true Destroyer of Worlds."

Heri blinked in surprise and said, "You're a death god too?"

"Aye, my lady, that I am, though the word god may be more than I can claim. I am not so much a god as I am a daemon, a personification. I am death made flesh."

She was having tea with Death, Heri thought. Death that called her 'my lady' and 'mistress', and
had perved on her, and claimed her father as his emperor. She held back how incredulous she was feeling in favour of listening to what else he had to say.

"I am the face Sumeria did dread into being when they came to know of the end of their lives and did regard it with terror," said Namtar, looking nostalgic. "And I have endured these millennia for I am the original, the first spawned Death. I was the first that did raise my ready sickle and did reap their pleading souls, and the fearful knowledge in their hearts of me hath faded not, even to this day. I was there in the Beginning, and I will be the last in the End."

Heri couldn't think of a more depressing existence.

"... that sounds rather lonely," she said after a moment, her tone gentle.

"'Tis this divide into pantheons that createth true loneliness," Namtar returned. "In the End of All Things, all representations will dissolve into one, and no longer shall there be multiple deities for a single jurisdiction. No longer shall there be Zeus and Thor, merely lightning and storms, and no longer shall there be Namtar, Thanatos, or even Lord Nergal, merely faceless death in its purest form. And if we are all one, we shall no longer be alone, shall we?"

Chapter End Notes

AN: Description of the Department of Mysteries comes from Professor Monroe by Athey. DO NOT READ IF YOU DISLIKE SLASH! Athey is a queen of high-quality novel-length slash, and this story is a prime example. LV/HP and incomplete, but an intelligent and thought-provoking read.

*No one has actually asked about it, but I wanted to explain 'muggle' versus 'Muggle.' The lowercase form is what I use when using the word as an adjective, like 'the muggle train.' The uppercase form is when it's used as a noun, as in 'the Muggles at the train station.' I thought this might be a bit confusing for some readers because I don't do this with 'wizards,' but the canon way of using the word as an adjective is 'wizarding.'

**Eyyy, more made up wizarding history! I love little details like this, they make whatever stories I read that include them feel so much bigger.

**(sigh) I just can't help myself. I'm a sucker for flowery titles. Yes, just like before, this is more for world-expanding than plot-relevance, but it's not completely irrelevant, I swear! Besides, it would be impossible to avoid this when Nergal really IS Emperor/King of the Mesopotamian underworlds. Since the Mesopotamians didn't really believe in rebirth and soul-cycles, it makes sense to me that all their dead were considered permanent citizens of his "kingdom", making him more a proper 'ruler' than Hades, who acts more like a 'keeper' in my opinion. (Not that there's anything wrong with that.)

****Did you like the pseudo ancient history I added in there at the end? Honestly, information about the Mesopotamian gods are super confusing; no two places I looked through for information could agree on more than one fact. I eventually had to just throw my hands up and just pick and choose what I wanted my Nergal to be like. I borrowed the magical historical events from the Marvel universe, so if you're interested in finer details of that, just google your term with 'Marvel'.


By the by, I didn't mean for Namtar to end up that way, he was supposed to be a brotherly white-knight type. Instead, you've got a shameless pervert like Miroku from InuYasha.
Wayne Hopkins was no one special. This was actually quite an accomplishment when one considered the fact that he was amongst the one-in-a-thousand schoolchildren within a hidden 2% of the human population of Britain who attended Hogwarts, an accelerated secondary school that educated the future leaders of their concealed nation. But even with the fluke of his inborn magical capacity, it was hard to be special when the thing that should have made him unique was shared and over-shone by the numerous people he went to school with, never mind his own friends.

Wayne had been soaring on Cloud Nine when his Hogwarts letter came, falling into a babbling, screaming mess of wonder and excitement along with his just as deliriously thrilled mother. Both had been anticipating acceptance from St. Cyprien’s, a local school not far from their home. Hogwarts was so far outside of their scope of imagination that his mum actually sent a message back asking if there had been a mistake in their mailing list.

There hadn't been.

"Oh . . .," she had breathed when the confirmation came. Her eyes then gained a zealous gleam and her cheeks flushed with thrill. "Oh, Wayne, my sweet little baby! You're going to —! Oh, my — Oh, my goodness! This is really happening!"

Wayne's mother, Jeanine Hopkins, was an intelligent but simple witch. She had been introduced to magic when the deputy headmistress of the school she ended up attending came knocking. The school she attended was one of many that were littered across the United Kingdom for the education of the common magical folk, what Wayne had often heard referred to politely as 'hedge-magi' by the other children in Hufflepuff — or 'peasants' if one were to listen to Malfoy's ilk. She had gone on to get her W.O.M.B.A.T.s and her O.W.L.s, but she didn't have the means or capability to get N.E.W.T.s, never mind a Mastery of any kind. The fields of magic that did not require advanced wanded magic to ascend to higher levels — divination; herbology; runes; et cetera — were simply areas she had no knack in.

She eventually ended up married to another Muggle-born who she had gone to school with, one who had the same talents like herself. When she became pregnant with Wayne, they had fully expected for him to follow a similar path as themselves, as it was very well known that children tended to have similar magical capabilities as their parents. It was because of that that she had been rendered insensible when Hogwarts came calling.

Little nobody Wayne Hopkins, the half-blood son of two average Muggle-borns, was Hogwarts material. Jeanine did not think in these terms as Wayne did, but the shock and elation were the same.
The Hopkins family was small and modest, and they would have been amongst the most unassuming of the British population if it wasn't for their magical nature. They lived in a nice but modest two-storey house in Kent. Jeanine worked as a pre-O.W.L.s arithmancy tutor. She managed to achieve a comfortable lifestyle for herself and Wayne after Wayne's father died (during You-Know-Who's war) by teaching almost exclusively for the children of very well-off families, even some Noble Families. The Hopkins family was not gentry like the majority of the alumni of Hogwarts by any means — Wayne's grandparents on both sides being regular working-class Muggles — but Wayne had been raised to know how to behave in society because of his mother's position.

It was actually because of his mother's position that Wayne had already known a few of year-mates before his first year. She was often invited to formal dinners and parties by her employers, and she nearly always took Wayne along with her. Those get-togethers were where he became acquainted with a few Ravenclaw girls a couple of years ahead of him; Michael Corner in Ravenclaw and Lily Moon in Slytherin; and the ever-prickly Zacharias Smith of Wayne's own social circle. Wayne had never imagined that he'd somehow become a part of a group that Smith was a prominent member of, but it was a fact that he now simply had to grin and bear if he ever wanted to make something of himself.

"There will be times when you will have to things that you pray to God you didn't have to," his mother had told him once when Wayne complained about having to make nice with the snobby children she taught who looked down on him. "But if we want to live in this world with any measure of success, we have to know when to pick our battles.

"We need to be in the good graces of these people, Wayne," she told him very plainly. "Our livelihood depends on it. What you have to consider is whether or not the satisfaction you might get from spiting those children will be worth the possibility that I will out of a job. I'm not saying you should let them bully you, and you should never go against your sense of right and wrong, but we have to make compromises if we want to get along with others. If you want to get anywhere in this world when you're grown, you will often have to decide if avenging a trivial blow to your pride is worth getting on the wrong side of someone in a higher position than yourself."

And so Wayne did his best not to provoke the ill tempers of the other members of the pack of Hufflepuffs he was a part of, going about this goal by being as agreeable as he could. He had to take advantage of every opportunity available to him if he was going to be a respectable adult, and it wouldn't do to tread on the toes of those that already had little use for him. He wasn't particularly clever nor ambitious, so any position he achieved would have to come from knowing people in good places. He was dead lucky that Heri had taken a liking to him for whatever reason or else his slim future prospects would have been even slimmer.

Wayne was well aware that he was now in the paradoxical position of being expected to be great and being expected to be mediocre to the same degree. It was damn-near inevitable that he would land himself some position of authority or distinction — rare was the alumnum of Hogwarts that did not at least become a government worker — but it was also equally inevitable that he would indeed become yet another of those no-name government workers who were but forgettable, replaceable cogs in the administrative machine that was the British Ministry of Magic. Wayne was no ground-breaker, he was not the sort to discover the cure for lycanthropy or revolutionise a field of study; it could be argued that it was his inborn destiny to be amongst the millions whose lives and deaths made no impact on the rest of the world save as a statistic.

He tried not to think such thoughts very often though. He didn't enjoy depression despite what his naturally melancholy disposition would lead some to think.
Wayne hadn't anticipated making many if any friends during his time at Hogwarts'. Even if he was acquainted with a handful of the other students, their relationship wasn't much past cordiality, and that was only with the couple amongst them that didn't outright look down on him. It seemed to be a cross that he would forever bear that he attracted the scorn of the sort that were inclined to belittling and the apathy of any other kind. Wayne was boring: he had no interesting pastimes, he wasn't particularly good at anything, and his communication skills were awkward and stilted. Other children just didn't like him; they seemed to come to that opinion instinctively.

It was because of this that Heri Potter continued to be a source of wonder for Wayne.

It was no secret to Wayne that the others of Heri's main circle merely tolerated him, only Hannah and Ernie being rather friendly since it was in their nature to be personable with anyone. Zacharias had no use for people he thought beneath him in importance; Sally-Anne thought he lacked any redeemable quality; and Megan didn't like any competition for Heri's attention, lame or otherwise. And yet despite all their resistance against him, Heri kept Wayne firmly at her side; she did not allow him to be driven away.

Wayne admitted that he had been a starstruck fanboy when he first met Heri. It would have been hard not to be when she was so awe-inspiring. She was so open and nice! She didn't mind humouring their pestering for her attention! She somehow made anyone who talked to her feel important! She sat at the top of the class despite being Muggle-raised! She had saved people's lives right in front of him!

It was only when Longbottom started worshipping the ground she walked on that Wayne noticed he was being just as embarrassingly reverent, but it was hard to stop when not long after his realisation she slew a Mountain Troll with its own club just like in the books about her. Wayne knew intellectually that she was a person like anyone else, but at the same time, she wasn't just anyone else: she was The Girl Who Lived, Defeater You-Know-Who, a professional hero.

It was a wonder that she didn't have Hannah scare him off like the rest of the horde that wanted a piece of the growing legend that was Heri Potter. Wayne didn't understand why she tolerated Wayne — and Megan as well — when they were not so far removed from the rest of the grasping throng. Heri let Wayne linger but she didn't encourage Roger Malone who was a wiz at astronomy and eagerly offered to do the homework for her; she smiled sincerely at Wayne but only gave small, shy ones when Terry Boot came around with books on creatures that she loved to read; she laughed at Wayne's corny attempts at humour but only tittered politely when Seamus Finnigan told outrageous jokes for her amusement. It didn't make any sense to him and he wished he could at least get a hint of her reasoning to relieve himself of the sense of forever toeing the edge of a precarious ledge that he could so easily be pushed off from at any time.

Heri was so very odd when it came to choosing the people she wanted around, favouring those who would have been outcasts if it wasn't for her. And it didn't appear to be pity either if her persistent affections for Flint was anything to go by. Perhaps she was an angel sent down from Heaven to save lonely souls from a life of solitude.

Wayne would admit if anyone had asked that he had been terrified that he would be forgotten when that Bulgarian Quidditch player started taking up so much of Heri's attention. Wayne had enough trouble staying relevant just amongst the people he more or less called his friends, competition from an international celebrity was not something he had been ready for. Oh, sure, Heri wasn't the shallow type like Megan and Sally-Anne who were easily bought by status and popularity, but that didn't change the fact that Wayne had little working for him already when it came to being interesting to others.
When Flint had graduated, Wayne had thought that Heri would be too upset by the loss of the older boy to pay any mind to any other fellow that was potentially boyfriend material. She had been dead gone on Flint and she wasn't the type to move on in such a relatively short period of time. Wayne had thought that the time had finally come that Heri would come to the conclusion that she didn't need other guys when she had Wayne (and Ernie . . . and Zacharias . . .). Not that Wayne thought he stood a chance in that way or anything, but if a miracle happened and she decided Wayne was what she wanted all along . . . well, he wouldn't be complaining or anything if that happened . . .

But no such thing happened. Viktor Krum swooped in at what should have been an inopportune time and snatched up what should have been Heri's dwindling interest in romance. Oh, she hadn't given up on Flint or anything, but it was no secret amongst those who paid attention that if Flint didn't pull his head out of his arse and quick, Heri's 'very good friend, Viktor', would end up her new older gentleman of choice. It wasn't hard to tell that Krum wasn't about to let an old crush get in his way.

How was Wayne supposed to compete with that? He wasn't even trying to contend for Heri's affections that way and he was still outclassed. When it came down to it, Krum had way more to offer her than Wayne did. He had fame; he had money; he had charisma; he was even a Triwizard Champion like she was. If that wasn't enough, he had impressed her more than she let on when he had shown-off to coerce her into going to the Yule Ball with him.

Wayne wasn't sure if Heri even realised it, but she had a great deal of respect and attraction for physical prowess. It was baffling to Wayne; she had proved time and time again that she was superior to anyone else their age when it came to strength, magical or otherwise, and yet she became giggly when blokes who were definitely weaker than her despite their muscles preened for her, even the ponces she normally didn't encourage. (Wayne had definitely heard Cormac McLaggen bragging to his cronies about how Heri had actually blushed when he offered to let her touch his biceps.) She had punched a Bludger and a fireball with her bare fists, taken on a thousand-year-old basilisk with only a sword, and sent a table of nearly a hundred of students into the wall with one push! Neither Flint, nor Krum, nor any else of the meat-heads that trailed after her could compare!

But — following that logic — that also meant that Wayne was even more outclassed than he had originally concluded. If the tossers that actually had traits that could get them somewhere with Heri — whether in her knickers or just in her good graces — were already out of their league by the sheer magnitude of Heri's . . . muchness? . . . then Wayne was essentially on the same level as an amoeba.

Suffice to say Wayne had spent a great deal of his fourth and fifth year utterly miserable about his lack of any admirable quality when he wasn't fretting over what calamity would befall Heri next.

On the topic of calamities, Wayne had never dreamed that his life would be so full to the bursting with the catastrophes that he had found himself involved in at least once a year if he was only counting the life-threatening ones. Now, it would have been awful enough if it was life-threatening for Wayne himself or one of the others in their cantankerous clique, but instead those disasters centred around Heri.

Wayne often wondered if it was a sign that he was unhealthily obsessed that he ranked harm to himself less important than harm to his friend/idol/object of reverence. He would then argued with himself that it was only logical that the loss of someone who was so obviously significant to the morality of their nation, never mind the scope of what she capable of accomplishing in the future, was clearly more important in the grand scheme of the world than a few kids who weren't nearly as influential.

(Wayne would then follow his original wondering with additional speculation if such personal
conclusions made him an amoral psychopath. He had yet to decide one way or another on that matter yet.)

Personal mental health crises aside, Wayne spent quite a bit of his time wondering if today would be the day that the unthinkable happened and Heri was somehow extracted from the realm of the living. If it was not enough that You-Know-Who had returned from the edge of death, Heri had been doing poorly since she had been kidnapped. It was looking to him that if she was not murdered outright by Dark Wizards (no doubt taking several with her) she would instead succumb to whatever illness she had contracted.

It was utterly wretched of him, but Wayne had been feeling significantly less secure about his own personal safety since Heri had become . . . 'more delicate', to word it tactfully. The traits that made her awe-inspiring had not gone away — she was still charming, and kind, and wickedly strong, and brilliant with her wand — but it was hard to not despair when it looked like the life was being sucked out of her. He hadn't noticed it happening until near the end of fifth-year (and didn't that make him feel like the worst sort of berk?), but not only was she was suffering from collapsing bouts wherein she was left utterly unable to protect herself, her skin had become the colour of watered-down milk, likely a result of how utterly tired she seemed to be all the time.

Wayne had never been more terrified in his life than that day not a month into their fifth-year, when he first witnessed Heri crumpling mid-stride and nearly taking a nasty tumble down the Grand Staircase. Her bogle attendant assuring him and the rest of her usual crowd that she had simply had a sleep attack did little to assuage his fright.

"Miss Heri just got lost in her thoughts," The bogle, Oleander, had explained to them as she fed Heri a potion.

"D-daydreaming makes her pass out?" Wayne had asked incredulously, watching with wide eyes as Ernie gathered Heri up in his arms to carry her to the Hospital Wing.

"Miss Heri is not completely tied down just right," Ollie had answered, trotting next to Ernie as their procession hurried along. "If her mind wanders, her soul wanders too."

Oleander's words were of course taken with a grain of salt. For all that bogles and house-elves and other hobs were Beings with high-level intelligence, they still did not have minds that were quite the same as humans. What Oleander meant and believed to be true was likely very different than how it was explained to her and what Wayne had understood of her words. If he was to accept what she had said at face-value then the situation was even direr than Wayne thought. Narcolepsy was terrifying enough by itself, but Heri's soul wandering away from her body . . . ? That sounded closer to dying than Wayne wanted to think about.

And that was the rub: It couldn't be narcolepsy. At least not the muggle form of it. Wayne was no genius, but even he knew that narcolepsy had nothing to do with a wandering mind, and it certainly didn't cause gradual albinism or whatever was happening to Heri. He would bet anything that it had something to do with whatever that Death Eater had done to her, but he was as ignorant as anyone else of what that could have been since even Heri wasn't completely certain considering she had been knocked out for part of it.

Wayne would admit to hovering even more than usual for all that it didn't do anything to help the situation. It was just . . . he didn't know what else to do. He was utterly terrified about what would become of Heri and what would become of the rest of them if she was no longer around to . . . well, to keep the Dark forces at bay for a lack of better words. He knew it was idiotic to think that a single girl — no matter how amazing — was somehow preventing You-Know-Who from razing Britain to the ground by just existing, but . . .
Even if she hadn't been so awing . . . Heri was — Heri was hope. She was the hope of wizards and Muggles alike. Heri was victory after a backbreaking battle that nearly ended in wretched defeat. She was proof that even when the chance for a happy ending was slim and it felt like the end was closing in, not all was lost. Like a wave of the hand from a sympathetic god, she had done what no one else could have done. And damn Wayne to Hell if he said he wasn't praying she would somehow do it again.

Wayne's mother had told him horror stories of how things had been before Heri defeated You-Know-Who the first time.

"It was dark times, love," his mother had told him sombrely when he had innocently asked about the Dark wizard that Heri Potter had defeated in the story she had read to him the night before. "And even dark days."

She had gone on to explain that Heri Potter and the Dark Lord You-Know-Who were not just made-up like the other characters in his books were.

"You-Know-Who had been gathering followers for a quite a while beforehand, but no one had thought it would get to the point that it did. Most of us had assumed it was just another cult of puffed-up blood-supremacists that were all bark and no bite, nothing new really. Of course, that was blown right out of the water when people started disappearing.

"No one knew what was going on. You'd see a neighbour or a co-worker one day but they'd be gone without a trace the next. Even people in important offices weren't spared. Not even the Aurors knew what was going on. We were jumping at shadows then, by the time they decided they didn't want to be stealthy any more.

"He and his minions came out in the open and declared that he was Lord —" she had then shuddered violently. "Well. There's a reason not many people dare to say his name even to this day. He put some sort of Taboo on it; if you made the mistake of saying his name, they would find you and —"

She had then took a moment to compose herself before she continued.

"Anyone that stood up to him ended up dead. Witches and wizards of known skill fought against him, and the ministry churned out Aurors by the battalion to do what they could, but nobody lived once he decided to kill them.

"People were frightened out of their minds and started turning on each other. Everyone suspected each other in some way, and it often happened that friendships of years and years were ruined by paranoia and terror. And they weren't exactly wrong to do so. It wasn't uncommon that a Death Eater would catch themselves a victim and put them under the Imperious Curse and an innocent person who had nothing to do with any of the fighting would end up murdering their own family in cold blood.

"All the while You-Know-Who's forces were growing. Some were afraid for their lives and thought to be on the winning side. Some wanted a bit of his power, and he was certainly getting himself power, whatever hellish ways he was achieving that. Dark days, dear, especially for us folk that weren't pure enough for their standard. It often happened that someone of Muggle descent would be . . . used as an example . . . a-and . . . pieces . . ."

"No one knew who to trust. We didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches or . . . terrible things happened.
"Now, when you weren't even a year old yet, You-Know-Who started targeting the Potter family. More correctly, he was gunning for a group of fighters that Dumbledore was leading in opposition, but he was very focused on the Potters and Longbottoms. They were the best witches and wizards of their time and they survived personal encounters with him on the battlefield more than once. I can only imagine that such a feat enraged him. When they went into hiding, he had people on the lookout for them.

"It eventually came to a head when he found the Potters on Halloween of '81. I don't know how he did it — the Potters were said to be hidden under a powerful enchantment — but they were found without a mark on them, so he must have made quick work of downing them both with Killing Curses before going for their daughter. Of course, after that, no one expected that Heri would somehow fend off a Killing Curse and destroy You-Know-Who in turn."

Wayne's mother had gone on to describe the celebration that had happened afterwards. People were crying and hugging in the streets. Songs and ballads were written in Heri's honour, and quite a few of the more spiritual sects made her a part of their practices by claiming her a saint or declaring her as some form of a deity or human avatar. The festivities had gone on for several months and well into the next year if Wayne's mother was to be believed.

Wayne had grown up on stories of Heri Potter, whether the original tale of that Halloween night or those adventure books that he now knew were fictional. Every child raised in the aftermath of You-Know-Who's destruction shared an ingrained awe that gave them a sense of camaraderie with others that they likely wouldn't have any connection with otherwise if it hadn't been for that almost universal reverence for the girl that had saved them and their families from death and subjugation. Wayne gave and received little respect from other children his age, but he would always find someone to share an understanding look with when it came to matters of Heri.

Wayne knew he wasn't the only one who was fretting themselves to pieces over what would become of Heri. It was the reason he was being so much more forgiving when the others vented their frustrations on him by being even bigger arseholes than usual. To be perfectly correct, Hannah, Ernie, and Zacharias might actually have been worrying themselves even more than Wayne in all his despairing misery. They had always counted themselves as the ones that took care of Heri in whatever capacity she needed, whether as mental support or acting as physical walls to scare off those that made trouble for her. That she was now suffering and from something they could do nothing about was likely grating on them quite a bit.

Since the new school year had started, Wayne had been doing his best to be . . . supportive or whatever it was called for Heri since she was clearly having a more laborious time than before. It wasn't even just her bizarre narcolepsy that appeared to have gotten worse, she had been noticeably more pre-occupied with something as well.

Wayne could count on one hand the number of times he had seen Heri so bothered before. One of those incidences was when Sally-Anne was petrified in the Hospital Wing, and another was when she was putting herself through the wringer to learn how to defend herself from dementors. That she was once again so thoroughly absorbed by something and for such a length of time meant nothing good.

It wasn't even the increase in her responsibilities either. Heri had always been absurdly competent, even to the point that Wayne couldn't begin to explain how she did it. In third-year, when Wayne was scrabbling to keep up with his two extra lessons, she still had time to hang out with everyone and even tutor people that came asking for it, even with Quidditch practice and all those classes she was somehow taking. She hadn't faltered in fourth-year either despite the Tournament demanding so much of her energy. In fifth-year Wayne had been worried that all the work would finally get to her
since she had Prefect duties on top of the rest the hoopla she was dealing with — never mind the reporters hounding her and the pack of Death Eaters breaking out from Azkaban — but still Heri made it look like she never even broke a sweat, not even her sleep attacks getting her down.

Quite frankly, it was terrifying. Wayne often claimed that things were terrifying since he was an unrepentant scaredy-cat, but Heri appearing anything less than 100% ready for anything was so out of the norm that it suddenly felt like literally anything else impossible — good or bad — could happen as well. Wayne didn't do well with the impossible, he was not properly equipped — physically or mentally — to deal with such things.

Oh, but how he wished he could do something! He had even joined in on the D.A.D.A. geared club Heri had started in hopes of helping in some way, if only to be target practice or cannon fodder.

The Defence Association, otherwise known as the DA, had been established after the mass outbreak from Azkaban. After deciding that they would do themselves no good merely sitting around being scared, they formed something of a duelling club in hopes of getting themselves somewhat prepared to defend themselves should worst come to worst. It took little time to get approval from the professors and less time after that to get a sizeable number of members. By the start of the new year, they had at least a third of the school as official members.

It didn't take very long for the members to start calling themselves 'Potter's Army' despite Heri's protests. The fact of the matter was that Heri led the DA like a general training their troops and had established a chain of command to uphold order as she saw fit. It had been an odd decision in the eyes of those who hadn't yet seen Heri as anything but her usual mild and agreeable self. It turned out that she could channel severity very well when it came to whipping people into fighting fitness.

"I wish this wasn't something we have to worry ourselves over," Heri had told them en masse when they were first going over the goals of the DA with the entire club. She had watched the struggling younger students with undisguised regret. "But we cannot afford to be helpless with the way things are going.

"We cannot afford to go easy when every single one of us is in danger," she continued, spearing each and every one of them with a sharp look. "They will come for us. It's only a matter of time. They will come for us because of who our families are and because they know very well that we have much more potential than the common magi to fight back if we get the chance. They will want to strike while we're still vulnerable, and they will not be calling ahead to ask pretty-please if we can come out for a friendly duel. We can't afford to be caught off guard and we certainly can't afford to have people who can't even throw up a shield and run for cover.

"I can't force you to stay and learn, but if you're determined to be here you will learn to protect yourselves. If the time ever comes that Hogwarts is attacked and the castle is breached . . . We will not be going down without a fight."

As much as her words had drained out the excitement of joining the DA, they also inspired a great more respect and gravity for what they were doing. There were certainly no fewer tears and in-fighting, but no one ever again complained about the stringency of the drilling. Even if any had wanted to, the commanding officers wouldn't have tolerated any of it after they realised the gravity of their positions.

That was another thing that had been instigated in Heri's militia-style Defence group: commanding officers. A captain was voted in from each House, and to qualify for the position they had to be an upper-year who had gotten at least an E on their Defence Against the Dark Arts O.W.L.s. They were responsible for maintaining discipline and keeping track of how their subordinates were progressing. Under every captain were the lieutenants, the ones who did the best
in practicals in each of the years. The lieutenants, in turn, would keep their units (their year-mates) on track and make sure none were left behind during drills.

It was actually a lot more militaristic than Wayne had originally been expecting, so he had ended up being not the most regular of participants when things were starting out. That was no longer the case of course, but he hadn't exactly gained himself much respect by jumping on the bandwagon so late, especially when everyone was taking participation so seriously now.

As of the new school year, the commanding officers were Roger Davies for Ravenclaw, Katie Bell for Gryffindor, Eugenia Gamp for Slytherin, and Gregory Munslow for Hufflepuff. There had been some fuss over who would lead the Hufflepuff faction since there were many that believed Heri would have been the best choice, but Heri was adamant that her official capacity as club president made it so it wouldn't be right for her to be a commanding officer. After some discussion, it was decided that a seventh-year would be best for the job.

Wayne was privately of the opinion that they had decided that a seventh-year would be best so they wouldn't have had to deal with Zacharias glowering at whomever it was that he considered his competition for the position. Not that he would have been the best option even if he hadn't been such a raging arsehole; the best in their year that wasn't already involved in the running of the DA was actually Susan Bones, the niece of the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

In truth, the DA had fallen to Hannah and Granger's authority since club activities had started up again. As the DA's vice-president and secretary respectively, they were in charge when Heri had other matters to attend to, and it just so happened that she had quite a lot of other matters to attend to as of late. Outside of teaching spell-casting, leading drills on battle formations, and still having final say in important decisions, Heri had very little to do with the day-to-day running of the DA any more.

Wayne was now just realising that it might have actually been her increase in responsibilities that was causing Heri so much stress, because she had been delegating as many of the duties she had that she could to whomever she thought fit. For the DA, it was Hannah and Granger; for her prefect duties, it was mostly accomplished by Ernie, the other prefect for their year; for her Quidditch captaincy, she left the scheduling of practices and the planning of plays to Anthony Rickett, Beater and her self-appointed vice-captain. If something needed to be done that didn't need specifically her to do it, she handed it off to someone else.

Heri had never seemed the type to delegate, but Wayne supposed that everyone had their limits, even if some limits were greater than other's.

Thinking on it now, it really shouldn't have been a surprise that Heri was becoming overwhelmed. He had been there at her sixteenth birthday party where she had received her family's headship ring from her godfather and was recognised by her family's magic as the rightful Countess of Heorshire. It might have been nothing more than an exciting formality to wrap up the party if it hadn't been decided then by whoever that Heri would start participating in the Wizengamot as well. Wayne didn't know who had thought that was a good idea, but he was seriously unimpressed with the state of their intentions towards Heri's well-being.

Seriously? School work, tutoring, prefect responsibilities, Quidditch duties, DA obligations, the shadow of You-Know-Who's forces hanging overhead, a debilitating illness, the press clawing at her, and who knows what else was already pressing down on her, and now she had to attend to judicial-legislative duties she had no prior experience with as well? Wayne needed a lie-down just from thinking about it!

There was no doubt it was all getting to her. Her collapses had become so commonplace now that
they no longer bundled her off to the Hospital Wing every time. Just that morning Heri had needed a wake-up *twice* and not even three hours in between incidences!

He had been the one that was closest on hand the second time — not counting Oleander of course — and had deposited her on a bench in the Transfiguration Courtyard to await her recovery so they could continue on to the Great Hall. Hannah then sent Ernie and Megan ahead to prepare a plate for Heri so they could get some food in her as soon as possible.

Seeing her laid out on the bench, Wayne was once again struck by how fragile-looking Heri had become. He had never really noticed before how *tiny* she was. Even at sixteen, she was the size of a first-year, and how unwell she looked made her seem even smaller. He could easily see the blue outline of her veins standing out against her translucent skin, colouring the places where the skin was thinnest (like her eyelids) to appear almost purple. The shadows around her eyes made it look like she was the star of a gothic horror film. He didn't know what to make of the strange gradient her hair now had, but it looked like she was bleeding out her vibrancy.

All in all, it was rather depressing.

A few minutes after Oleander administered the potion to speed up her awakening, Heri was rousing again.

"*Uggghh* . . ." she groaned, tilting her head away from the light.

Hannah perked immediately.

"You all right?" she asked as she pulled an umbrella from her satchel and held it over Heri's head.

Hannah had become increasingly sensitive to Heri's more trivial needs since her kidnapping. If a certain tool could be useful to Heri at any point, Hannah carried it in her bag. She was nearly as intuitive as Sally-Anne was when it came to Heri's moods now as well. As Sally-Anne had doubled-back a few moments before for something she had left in the dorms, it was currently up to Hannah keep things moving along.

"*Mmm* . . ."

A moment of shifting later, Heri was sitting up, smoothing down her brow bone to ease the burn in her eyes.

"Yeah . . ." she murmured, looking up at them through half-closed eyes. She gave them a bleary-eyed smile. "Yeah, I'm fine."

For a split-second, Wayne could have sworn her eyes were a void of black. Another look after a few bewildered blinks on his part told a different story though.

"Wayne?" Heri said, giving him a look of drowsy concern. She had caught his confusion.

"Ah, it's nothing!" he said, ruffling his hair bashfully. "Shall we get you to breakfast now?"

Zacharias helped her to her feet and Wayne took care of her bag. With Hannah chatter cheerfully to ease the air, Heri was led to the Great Hall on Zacharias' arm.

The Great Hall was abuzz as usual, the time late enough in the morning that nearly every student had arrived. The ceiling mirrored the uncommonly sunny day they were having that October, casting dancing streaks of light across the tables. Combined with the upbeat atmosphere that came with the approach of Halloween, it made for a cheerful picture that was not at all congruent with the anxiety
felt by those who were aware of Heri's condition. They had kept Heri's narcolepsy pretty well out of the public eye, so it was understandable that no one else was bothered, but it still felt like an insult to Wayne's sensibilities.

Ernie and Megan were waiting for them along with Longbottom and Granger. A plate of Heri's usual breakfast fare was ready for her, and full platters of warm food had been set aside for the rest of them. Alas, any appeal it might have had was dimmed by the squabble Megan and Granger were once again engaged in.

Wayne couldn't hold back a grimace. Just what they needed: another fight. One that Heri would no doubt end up mediating when she should have been taking it easy before classes.

"Can you lot just shut your bloody traps?" Zacharias griped, reaching for the platter of bacon.

"Keep out of it, Smith!" Megan snapped, scowling ferociously.

"Oh, now, let's not fight," Heri pleaded, looking around with an admonishing look. "It wouldn’t do to start the day on an unpleasant note."

"Yeah, Megan," sighed Hannah. "Do you two really have to fight every time you see each other?"

"Well if Smith minded his own ruddy business," Megan declared hotly, crossing her arms, "and Granger knew when her blasted nagging was unwanted, I'd be having a grand time of it!"

"It's no wonder we're nowhere near finished with the project considering the way you'd rather sit around on your bum and moan instead of getting anything done!" Granger retorted, derision written all over her face.

"What project is this?" asked Heri before Megan could snipe back.

Granger huffed before simmering down to speak calmly to Heri.

"It's the transfiguration project," she said. "You know the one. We're supposed to work together and use a common base to create a magical artifact through a combination of Transfiguration and any other branch of magic we decide on.

"I had thought," Granger continued, giving Megan a withering look, "that using a combination of transfiguration and charms would be easy enough to accomplish since they're both wanded magic — never mind that we're working as a four-man team with Terry Boot from Ravenclaw as well — but apparently doing her part by helping to charm the thing is just too much to handle."

"Now, Hermione . . ." Longbottom interjected hesitantly.

But he was cut off by Megan indignant squawking.

And then they were off again, all but clawing at each other in their contention.

"Wait," Heri interjected after a few more moments of quarrelling. "You mean you haven't finished yet? It's due next week!"

"That's exactly my point!" Granger cried, smacking the table for emphasis. "It's due next week and we're only half-way done! This is no time to be dithering!"

When no one made any attempt to back her up, Megan turned especially sour and refused to talk
to anyone for the rest of the day, ignoring Heri's friendly overtures as well. Honestly, it would have been a blessing if she hadn't been so obnoxious about her continued silence.

Megan still hadn't gotten out of her foul mood the next day either, somehow getting more unbearable when Granger and Longbottom showed up again the next day and ended up discussing their project with the curious Heri.

"What is it that you're making?" Heri had asked, prompting a flood of words from Granger as she explained their entire outline.

Apparently, they were hoping to create some sort of mood-controlled music-box, one that not only changed the type of music it played depending on the attitude of the person who wound it but change the stylistic design of the music-box dancers as well. It sounded fairly complicated considering it would essentially be self-transfiguring as an end product, and Heri was duly impressed by the long-winded explanation.

Granger was still going on about it when Megan came in, causing the mousey-haired harpy to glower ineffectively.

"Just keep out of it right now," Sally-Anne told Megan discreetly before she could throw a fit. "As long as Heri's got her attention Granger won't be on your case. Of course," she continued, giving Megan a heavy-lidded unimpressed look, "she isn't wrong for wanting you to get your arse in gear and finish your blasted project already."

Megan would have blown off Sally-Anne's words of course if it hadn't been the stony oppressive look Zacharias gave her when he saw her opening her mouth again. Wayne had to admit, even though Zacharias was a Grade-A tosspot he was unrivalled in his ability to muzzle Megan when she was working up a froth.

"— golden obsidian is a bit hard on the eyes though," Wayne heard Heri say as his attention wandered back from the walking drama that was Megan Jones, "so I topped it with an encasing sheet of clear quartz.

"Could you get me the —?" Heri said to Oleander, only to be cut off by something being thrust into her hands. "Ah! Thank you, dear!"

Heri then held up a slab of what looked to be stone or dark crystal for Granger and Longbottom to see. It was about a knuckle and a half thick and was cut in a perfect circle about the circumference of her face. On the edges, he could see the distinct gleam of silver moulded into ivy-like filigree. What made his breath catch though was the surface of it. When tilted just right, the smooth glass-like face caught the light like a droplet of water and reflected back the captured image exactly like a mirror.

"I considered other vitreous stones as well," Heri continued, handing the object to Granger for her to examine, "but calcite and flourite were pathetically low on the Mohs Scale, never mind that they're soluble and that they can't achieve the crystal symmetry I wanted even if they went through inversion."

"What about some sort of beryl?" asked Granger as she inspected the thing. "They're in the hexagonal system as well, right?"

Heri shook her head.

"You know how easy it is to taint beryl with impurities. It's far too susceptible for something that
needs to be able to take some knocks. I considered goshenite of course — I could have probably tinkered with the pleochroism to preempt any inconsistencies with the chromaticity — but the metaphysical properties were completely wrong for this sort of thing. Self-control and creativity would make any image shown easily manipulated and distorted."

"What's that?" Sally-Anne asked, no doubt interested only because whatever it was resembled a mirror.

"It's a scrying stone," Heri replied, smiling at the show of interest. "It's what I've been working on for the project."

"H-have you been—been doing it . . . b-by yourself?" Longbottom asked in concern. "What about your partners?"

"Oh, don't worry, Neville," Heri assured him. "The rest of my group were perfectly helpful. It's just — well, I have similar assignments given to me in some of my other classes as well, so I decided to use this for those subjects too. We weren't assigned partners in my other classes, so I've been doing the extra stuff myself."

"You're using the same project for different assignments?" Granger gaped, looking scandalised.

"Well, I don't really have time to do multiple projects," Heri explained, giving a little shrug. "I'm a bit swamped at the moment. I asked the professors for permission, and they said as long as the parts that were specific to each class were completed correctly I can do as I please."

"Which classes are you turning it in for?" asked Ernie, who looked envious he hadn't thought of doing the same.


"Wait, how can a mirror made of rock fit all of those categories?" Megan asked, looking baffled and outraged. It seemed she had pulled herself out of her sulk to be indignant again.

"It's a scrying stone," Heri said again, this time a bit more pointedly. "Besides using transfiguration to form it, I had to use a combination of runes and arithmancy to enchant it."

Here she turned it over to show a complicated matrix of rune formations engraved in the silver backing.

"It's used much like a crystal ball — it shows the past, present, future, possible outcomes and whatever — so Professor Trelawney will accept it as a divining instrument. And it can be used to learn the fine details of people's defining circumstances, ghosts included, so it's a perfect fit for my Ghoul Studies assignment too, which was to create a tool that can be used to help us when we encounter spirits and the undead. Actually, I might be able to ask Professor Flitwick to consider it as an extra-credit project as well since enchanted objects fall under the charms category too."

"I have to thank you, Neville," she then said, smiling brightly at the Gryffindor boy. "I was properly stumped on what I was going to do to handle all of my assignments, but then I was using that crystal ball you got me for some divination homework and it suddenly hit me."

"A-Ah . . ." Longbottom stuttered, going red in the face. "Y-you d-d-don't ha-ave to th-thank—thank me! I-I'm just glad it h-helped you e-even a l-l-lit-tle bit!"

Wayne didn't pay much attention to it at the time, but the envious look on Megan's face that
morning coupled with the positively foul temper she was suffering from lately should have been proper warning that she was on the edge of going completely off and violently.

That evening at dinner they had the dubious pleasure of receiving the Evening Prophet, the special edition of the Daily Prophet that went out when whatever news the had couldn't wait until the next day to be sent out. As of late, it had been used to deliver the news of Death Eater attacks, and a few editions had already been the bearers of ill tidings concerning the continued safety of the families of students. To put it plainly, the news of death in the family had come with the Evening Prophet before, and no one was eager to receive it again as it could mean the loss of a loved one.

On that occasion, the paper reported that there had miraculously been less death and injury than usual after the previous night's raid. It was cold comfort, but none of the ones who had died were family to any of the students, causing an almost universal sigh of relief. Unfortunately, one of those that had been caught in the crossfires and was now hospitalised was —

"GWEN!" Megan yowled, horror written all over her face.

There, on the front cover, was a photo of Healers swarming all over the people who had been carted over to St. Mungo's. Amongst the injured was a battered Gwenog Jones, Captain of the Holyhead Harpies and Megan's older sister.

The girls immediately swarmed Megan, looking just as aghast. But as soon as Heri reached out, presumably to hold the distraught girl's hand, her hand was smacked away.

Heri yelped in shock and recoiled.

"Megan?" Heri asked, looking bewildered. "What —?"

This time she was slapped.

"Miss Jones!" the teachers cried from where they were bustling over.

In the few seconds of confusion, the situation had changed from the girls trying to console Megan in her time of need to Hannah and Zacharias restraining the shrieking Megan by holding her against the table and forcing her arms up her back while Sally-Anne, Ernie, and Wayne stood protectively in front of the perplexed and hurt Heri, Oleander huddled up to her side.

"This is your fault!" Megan was bellowing, tears trickling down her face. "My sister's hurt and it's all your fault!"

"Miss Jones, control yourself!" Professor Sprout commanded, looking utterly appalled. "Twenty points from Hufflepuff and three weeks of detention for attacking another student!"

"Oh, so she gets special treatment and gets to sit around doing nothing, but I get in trouble for pointing it out?!" Megan spat, struggling against the grip Hannah had on her wrists.

"What the heck are you even talking about?!" Hannah yelled, giving her a good shake. "Heri's done nothing wrong at all, and now you're attacking her for trying to comfort you?!

"COMFORT ME!" the raging hell-cat shrieked, her face turning into a proper mess of tears and twisted features. "I wouldn't need any comfort she wasn't sitting on her arse while people are getting killed! She's supposed to be the defeater of You-Know-Who, right? What the hell is she doing acting like she doesn't have a job to do?! MY SISTER NEARLY DIED! WHY HASN'T SHE KILLED YOU-KNOW-WHO YET?!"
"That's quite enough, Miss Jones!" the thundering voice of Headmaster Dumbledore. His stern visage was one the students had never seen before on his usually jovial face. "You will be escorted to my office where your parents will be contacted, but do not think for a moment that this appalling behaviour is anywhere near excusable!"

Megan was extracted from Hannah's and Zacharias' hold by a murderous-looking Snape, who all but flung her at Professors Sprout and McGonagall. She was then marched out of the Hall like a criminal by the deputy headmistress and her Head of House amongst the agitated chattering of students gossiping.

Meanwhile, Professors Flitwick had hopped onto the bench Heri was seated at and was examining her face for damage.

"My dear!" he exclaimed, looking troubled, "You're bruising quite a bit! I hadn't realised she hit you so harshly!"

True to his words, the right side of Heri's face was already starting to purple, a hand imprint standing in stark red contrast to the rest of her skin.

"I-It actually doesn't hurt that much at all!" Heri said, appearing to be trying to assuage the professor's concern. "Megan's . . . not exactly the . . . strongest. It's just . . . it's just — well, I-I've been bruising so much . . . easier lately. I bumped my leg the other day and — and it looked like I'd been clubbed with a bat!"

If anything, Heri's words made the distress of those listening even worse. They were now reminded it wasn't just Megan attacking another student in a fit of insanity, it was Megan attacking a heavily unwell girl who was currently in a very breakable condition.

"Oh, no, this won't do at all!" Professor Flitwick said. "To Madam Pomfrey with you! That cheek will need bruise balm if nothing else."

And so here they were again, delivering Heri to the Hospital Wing, but in even a worse mood than usual.

"I'll kill that girl once I see her again," Zacharias was muttering angrily, looking nearly as murderous as Snape had. "Didn't I tell you, Potter? You've always been too kind. I always knew she was a two-faced bitch too caught up in herself to be of any use to anyone."

Heri merely sighed, not looking at anyone.

Though she didn't say anything, they knew she was distraught by the way she was once again holding Iolanthe in her arms. Since fourth-year, Heri rarely indulged herself with her doll in public unless she was exceptionally upset.

"I'll kill her," Zacharias grumbled again, this time glancing around at the rest of them as well.

Their gazes joined and once again Wayne was united in understanding with the people who were his friends despite everything. In this case, petty differences came second to the agreement that Megan Jones no longer had any place amongst them, and that shunning would be the least of her problems if she tried anything ever again. Attack Heri Potter? Not on their watch.

Wayne Hopkins was no one special, but that was okay. It didn't take anyone special to know that there were things in this world that were worth fighting for.
One of the things Heri learned very quickly to get used to was Namtar's hovering presence. One would have thought that Death incarnate had better things to do than leer out from dark crevices like a sex-offender at innocent school-girls minding their own business, but this was apparently not the case.

"Don't you have souls to reap or something?" Heri once rebuked when she noticed him trailing after her on her way to the Forbidden Forest.

"Not at all~" Namtar had crooned from the hollow of a tree's roots, his eyes and teeth gleaming like out of the darkness like the Cheshire Cat. He then oozed out like discharge from a gory wound and slithered through the grass like a snake.

Heri instinctively pulled her skirt more securely around her legs, not trusting him to not sneak a peek up her skirt if he had the chance. Namtar noticed her action and affected a mien of wounded offence, but Heri was having none of that.

"All the other incarnations of death taking care of it then?" Heri said, not letting him get away without an explanation.

"Death needeth not travel any distance, my lady," Namtar said, surging up as a vaporous mist that drifted along in front of her as she walked. "We are forever in all places wherein things may expire. Much liken to the God of the Abrahamic religions are we, perfect in our ubiquity. This Namtar may be attending to his lady fair, yet death delayeth not for any who would so ask of it."

"So . . . so you don't do any actual reaping?" she asked as she stopped to dress down for her usual patrol with the herd. "What if nutters like Voldemort show up and make horcruxes and such?"

"Death mayn't become lost when one journeyeth to evade our grasps," Namtar scoffed, drifting around her. "There be no ministry above the law of death."

"Then what has Voldemort been doing then?" Heri retorted. "It seems to me he's been doing a bang up job of not dying."

"My lady yet beholdeth the world with the eyes of Man," Namtar had then replied serenely. 'Did this self-styled 'Lord' not achieve his first demise before such a time that those not endowed with magic would perish naturally? In sooth, is it not merely the summer years of their life? And is five and fifty years not considered but the bloom of adulthood amongst wizardkind? And will he not soon expire once more under the just hand of my lady well before his eightieth year? Nay, Mistress, this charlatan will not run beyond the reach of Death. For his crimes will he reach the Veil afore his umquhile contemporaries."

Namtar was exceptionally good at inducing existential crises and philosophical musings with his words, never mind that he didn't seem to do so. With his near constant hovering since he had arrived, Heri found herself lost in thought about the workings of the world more often than she had ever had in her life, resulting in an annoying amount of collapses.

She wanted to assure her friends that she hadn't suddenly taken a turn for the worst as they were obviously thinking, but explaining that the psychopomp of her second father's pantheon had taken to distracting her with thoughts of mortality and the balance of existence wasn't something you just brought up in a conversation. She had been thinking of telling Ernie and Zacharias of course, it felt appropriate somehow that they and the other godborns of Hogwarts would know, but godborns were rather sensitive about the amount of contact (or lack thereof) they had with their godly progenitors,
and she didn't know how to bring it up without it coming across as bragging. Goodness knows she didn't need any more misdirected envy blowing up in her face, metaphorically or literally.

Outside of being a general distraction, Namtar was actually a soothing presence when it came to situations that hinged on human sentiments. He had made it so that Heri had actually been feeling as even-tempered as she outwardly appeared more often than not. Whether distracting her from her own outrage with his cosseting when Megan had slapped her or keeping her in good humour with his mocking words during tedious Wizengamot meetings, Heri didn't have a chance to become infuriated while her self-appointed Court Jester was there.

She had been confused at first why no one else saw Namtar as he pranced about her, making a general bother of himself. Her heart all but burst out of her chest when he came creeping out from under the seat of the Hogwarts Express that she was sitting on with the majority of her friends present, but not a one of them reacted to his presence, not even Ernie, nor Zacharias, nor even Luna.

When given a baffled, demanding look from Heri, Namtar merely bared his hands, completely at ease.

"Death doth walk unseen," he said in explanation. "No living eyes may bear witness save those few who walk hand in hand as brethren."

And so Heri had then lost any reasonable excuse to tell Namtar to shove off for the majority of the time. The excuse that she couldn't be seen with a Higher Being hanging around was made moot. Of course, her reluctance toward his continued presence was eventually eased when he made himself more of a boon than a bother.

There had been one particular instance that Heri had been quite appreciative that Namtar invisibly followed her around to dissuade her from her ire. It was during her third meeting with the Wizengamot, and she had been in an already foul mood that day without the patronisation of senior Magistrates.

Heri wasn't sure what she had been expecting when she had decided to attend sessions well before she would have been expected to, but it certainly wasn't the mind-numbing tedium that she received. That and condescension from those that looked at her and saw nothing but a little girl. Granted, Heri was a little girl (sixteen for a wizard was considered the middle of childhood) but she was nowhere near the youngest person to have ever sat in the Wizengamot — that distinction went to Ciel Phantomhive, a 19th-century earl, at the age of ten. One would have thought that being a well-respected public figure would have earned her some benefit of the doubt.

During her third meeting, wherein they were being called to judge the sentence of a fellow who had gotten thoroughly shitfaced and went shouting down a heavily trafficked road about the dragon reserve not far from the area, Heri had tried to ask for clarification on a matter only to be cut-off and dismissed by a gangling twig of a man with the most disgustingly wobbly jowls she had ever had the misfortune to witness. It was Causticus Nott, Theodore Nott's great-uncle and one of those that had looked down on her since she had given her inductive vows.

"Never mind your pointless questions, girl," he had sneered from within his ilk of blood supremacists in the Cavalier seating section. "We don't have time to drag out this judgement just to pander to children who would be better off left to their school books! I move that we now call for a vote!"

"Contemptuous, curmudgeonly cur of a shameful stain of a house!" Namtar hissed. "He is envious of you, my lady. I do see it upon his shrivelled soul!"
Sirius' look of pure murder communicated a similar sentiment. It was only Heri pacifying grip on his forearm that kept her godfather from snarling back.

"Mr. Nott," Heri then replied, going wide-eyed and doll-faced as she threw Nott's lack of an ennobled title into his face. She had noted that he was touchy about it; he soured whenever he was addressed formally. "I apologise for encroaching on your patience on this trivial matter of the strictest law of our nation. It had seemed to me that no one had yet confirmed nor denied if any Muggle had actually heard what Mr. Clinkscales had said that evening, but the topic must have already been discussed in a manner of speaking above my level of comprehension. Do excuse me, sir."

She had no personal conflict with the Nott boy she went to school with, but if this insect of a man was an example of what Nott the younger could be like in the future, the two of them and any family they might have in future would be sitting firmly in opposition. Heri had designated her seats as Parliamentarian when she had arrived at the administrative offices to re-initiate her family's position, and she had been on the receiving end of many stink-eyes from those of the Cavalier Party for throwing the balance of voting power well into the Parliamentarians' favour with her fourteen votes, but not even the Magistrates who were well-known to have family members who were once or currently are Death Eaters were as tongue-curlingly revolting as Causticus Nott.

"This blaggard thinketh himself superior," Namtar jeered in her ear, preventing Heri from automatically hearing the defamation Nott was no doubt raining down on her in an attempt to cow her. "In sooth lesser hath he been from his birthing. 'Tis only by the fortune that his elder brother and brother-son did perish that he doth sit 'pon his self-made throne, and only 'til such a time that the son of his brother-son claimeth the right for himself!"

It was difficult to feel anything but placid contempt for anyone when the personification of death was whispering in her ear about the multiple reasons the person in question was barely a speck of dust in the grand spectrum of things. She had never been one to take an unjust dressing down without biting back just as harshly, but a Wizengamot meeting was no place for such demonstrations. If she wanted to successfully nudge the ministry into a more stringent wartime regime she couldn't be seen as anything but in control of herself. It wouldn't have done to affirm certain beliefs that she was nothing but an immature child either. She would have been able to control her pique without Namtar there, but there was no contesting that her ire still would have been visible for all to see without him tempering her.

Namtar also proved to be of great help when it came to research on soul magic. It went without saying that he was a dab hand when it came to matters of the soul. He didn't participate directly — to do so would go against the impartial nature of death — but he answered the questions she asked in a clear, concise manner and he never he tried to gloss over 'questionable' topic like Professor Dumbledore did.

"To taint your beautiful mind with such wicked knowledge would be a crime to my sensibilities," the headmaster had told her when she asked about it.

Heri wanted to ask if the headmaster thought she had lived in a bubble her entire life and never learned that there was some fucked up shite out there.

But Namtar never coddled her like that. He treated her with a kind of respect she didn't get from anyone else. That wasn't to say that her family and friends looked down on her — far from it. It was just that . . . Namtar treated her like she was grown. He didn't see a little kid when he looked at her, he saw her as a fully competent adult that didn't need any sugar-coating. It was . . . nothing like she had ever been treated before but very nice, especially when she wanted to complete her self-assigned tasks in as timely a manner as possible.
It was because of this great faith concerning her thoughts and decisions that Heri finally concluded that the other semi-divine students could no longer remain ignorant of the reality of the situation with Voldemort.

Heri had been hesitant to involve others lest they be made bigger targets, but if she had help in the form of people like herself . . . well, they needed all the help they could get. Godborn she may be, that did not automatically mean she was inherently capable of single-handedly defeating an army of violent, rampaging warlocks several times her age and experience-level who were headed by the most blood-thirsty Dark Wizard of the modern age. Professor Dumbledore seemed to be under the impression that getting rid of Voldemort's horcruxes would be enough to stop the madness, but even taking out the monstrosity that was Voldemort wouldn't make the Death Eaters self-implode or whatever.

Which was why she was now lingering longer than usual after a DA meeting.

Instead of the Room of Requirement they had been using on and off since Umbridge had tried her hand at strangling any potential uprising, they were on the grounds near Hagrid's hut that day. There was a fairly heavy rain that had been persisting for the entirety of the week, and Heri been using that to provide training experience for less than ideal battle terrain. Lo and behold, they had been slipping and tripping left, right, and centre, but they eventually got used to the poor visibility and unstable footing. Heri was actually quite proud of them and was glad they were leaving today visibly exhausted but much improved.

"Ernie, call our crowd together," she bid her friend very seriously when the majority of the rest of the club had already left.

"What? Our —? Oh!" Ernie said in realisation at her pointed look. He flicked his eyes to the sides very conspicuously. "You mean . . . ?"

Heri was tempted to roll her eyes at Ernie's complete lack of stealth. It was a good thing she had had the sense to pull him aside first else they would have caught the attention of everybody nearby. As it was, their 'private' discussion had already been noted by the more observant members of the dispersing DA.

"Yes," Heri said instead, channelling all the severity she had. "There's something you all need to know."

One of the things in his life that gave Albus Dumbledore as much pain as it did pleasure was watching as the students under his care grew out of their tender beginnings and became their adult selves. Under his eyes had several generations of the most remarkable and the most infamous of witches and wizards taken their first steps in achieving their lofty accomplishments. He had seen the start of celebrated heroes and notorious criminals alike. And for every one of them, beloved or feared, he couldn't help but be amazed each and every time that the little saplings that he did his best to coax out reached the points that they did.

He supposed it was his penance for the follies of his youth that for every bright and beautiful soul he could proudly say he educated there would inevitably be those that would fall to iniquity despite his best efforts. He was no less proud of the shining examples of great potential put to good use, but it always left a bitter taste on his tongue that so many would inescapably dig themselves knee-deep into wicked pastimes no matter what he tried.
The best example of this was, of course, Tom Riddle, but that was nowhere near where the list ended. To this day, Albus still remembered the sweet and eager faces of Waldon Macnair, the elder Carrow twins, and even Bellatrix Lestrange when they took their first steps into Hogwarts. Had they not allowed hatred and violence to consume them they could have gone on to be more than the wretched refuse that rotted away within the disgusting den that was of Azkaban.

It went without saying that Albus found himself on occasion wondering which of the latest generation would end up wasting their potential on false gods and pointless hatred. It was no longer a question of *if* but of *whom, how many, and to what extent*. It was not that he had given up hope in the goodness within them, but he had come to learn very well that the fates of other wizards were not something he had any means of controlling.

And so Albus Dumbledore often sat in his office and wondered over the circumstances he *did* have some measure of control over and pondered what actions he could possibly take so that the least amount of his students would find themselves at sticky ends.

The focus of his thoughts of late had of course been Herakles Potter. How could it not have been when she was now the turning point of so many aspects of their society? Even outside of her prodigious influence on her classmates, she was affecting the inner-workings of their government and the lives of the common people simply by existing. He considered what Britain might become if she began to actively assert her influence and he had yet to conclude if such an end would be ideal.

That was not to say that he believed that she would strive for destructive changes as Voldemort did, but Albus couldn't help but be wary of what could come of a godborn — and a powerful one as Heri was proving herself to be — having an even greater sway than she already did. Albus believed Heri to be a sensible and just-minded girl, but that was the hitch: she was still a *girl*. She was a young girl still in her infancy by the measure of a wizard's life-span, and she still had so much more to learn of the world before grown wizards and witches should have been looking to her for wisdom and guidance.

What could that sort of expectation do to a child? A child should be free to learn and make mistakes with security in the knowledge that they would grow better in time. With all of Britain looking to her for leadership, she would no longer have the luxury of having her minor mistakes overlooked, and she would learn the hard way that the more powerful the wizard, the bigger the reach and the consequences of their mistakes.

His heart had gone out to Heri when she was so viciously accused by a dearly-kept friend for the actions taken by the Death Eaters. It was as he had feared: responsibility for matters she had no business shouldering were being pinned to her from people who did not realise that she was as human as anyone else. In a manner of speaking of course. It was saddening to see that even someone who should have known her very well still had unreasonable ideals about her. He supposed it was not too surprising; even his own colleagues tended to put him on a pedestal despite coming to know very well that he was far from infallible.

Albus had decided to take Heri under his wing this year. How could he not when she needed a steady hand to guide her through the difficulties she was now wading through? The responsibilities and demands she had decided to impose on herself when she came to understand the reality of the prophecy. He had originally planned to induce a detraction of her duties around the school so she would have less unnecessary pressure outside of aiding him with the hunt for the horcruxes, but the stubborn girl had actually added more weight onto herself by declaring she would attend Wizengamot meetings on top of everything else!

He certainly admired her wilfulness, but he could not help but worry she was taking on more than
she could manage. Granted, she was still in possession of the Time-Turner she had been granted three years before, but there had to be an appropriate measure of rest even with living every day twice. He wondered if it was a facet of being a godborn that she was able to keep up such a labour-intensive schedule for such a long period of time. Even with all his magisterial positions, Albus did not traverse through the Forbidden Forest every second day to hone his physical combat prowess to the exacting standards of a tribe of centaurs as Heri did; he imagined that he would have succumbed to death years ago if he did.

Since the approach of the winter holidays, a shadow had come to hang over his thoughts as he progressed in educating Heri in his knowledge of the horcruxes. Severus had informed him that Voldemort had breached the Department of Mysteries through means of an inside agent and been furious to learn that the prophecy he was after had already been retrieved. Severus' position was made precarious when it was revealed that he had been part of the retrieval and had failed to inform Voldemort of it, but he had maintained his cover with some fast talking and by revealing the original prophecy in its entirety.

"He has become more fervent than ever to see the girl dead," Severus had said grimly in conclusion, his hands shaking in effect from the Cruciatus he had received as punishment. "I suggest you hasten in your excursions unless you wish to see the population decimated once again."

'Decimated'; that was the word Severus had used, and he was not wrong in using it. The last war had been a tragedy of a slaughter, resulting in the end of countless families and clans. Of the children who lived to know a life without constant bloodshed, the majority of them were orphans, outnumbering the children with at least one parent to care for them by a good two thirds. Both sides of the field had lost a devastating amount of lives, and Albus did not relish rehashing such a travesty of a 'purification'. Voldemort had yet to break out into anything larger than the occasional pillaging of a village, but it would not be long before he became arrogant in his powers once more.

They were running out of time. The horcruxes had to be destroyed as soon as possible. All of them.

Heri had been a gem in her assistance to him, performing impeccably when Albus charged her with the mission to convince Horace to part with the memory of his conversation with Tom about horcruxes so they could gain more insight, and she was always a thoughtful sounding board for his pondering when it came to discussions. Between the two of them they had already found and destroyed Ravenclaw's diadem which she had found in the Room of Hidden Things, a location found within the matrix of the Room of Requirement. If that wasn't enough, Slytherin's locket had been found in 12 Grimmauld Place of all places, hidden in a drawer in the bedroom of the late Regulus Black. He knew he had yet to gain her trust back fully since the incident where he became unhinged in the presence of the Resurrection Stone, and he was loathed to ruin all goodwill between them when he would inevitably have to tell her the reality of the grim situation.

How was Albus to tell a girl not even out of her school years that she would have to perish for the tyrant terrorising the nation to be defeated? How could he expect her to knowingly bear that weight? Already he was asking her to ready herself to fight — how could he ask her to die?

He had come to think of her much like a protégée, one he would have entrusted to carry on the good fight when it came the time that he would leave this plane, and he wondered now if this was another aspect of the penance he was obliged to give that he would have to offer up a child he loved so dearly as a sacrifice to rectify the horrors caused by the boy he had failed the most grievously.

And here she was now in front of him, just come in for their biweekly meeting.

He had heard word from Filius, the Defence Association's club advisor, that she had taken a leaf
from Alastor's book and had been working the students to react at the drop of a hat. Indeed she appeared to have gotten her hands on an Auror's training manual somehow (possibly from one of the Aurors now guarding the school) and had been modifying the methods to suit her needs. Filius had gone on with enthusiasm, boasting of not only skilled duellists but surprisingly capable fighting units. They had battlefield simulations every Friday so that the students could become used to working together. And, if the diminutive professor was to be believed, Heri had incorporated flying into the mixture as well, gathering up skilled flyers from the available Quidditch players to create a sort of mounted cavalry.

For all that Albus admired the girl for her ability to rally her classmates for confrontation, he dearly wished that they did not feel that they had to do so. He was not blind to the implications of even the youngest of the students being enlisted to train — they believed they were still not safe even within the walls of Hogwarts. He could not blame them for thinking so, of course; in times of troubles such as these, it felt as if nowhere in the world was safe.

She looked positively dead on her feet, Albus noted. If he recalled correctly, she should have just come from Quidditch practice after meeting with the Defence Association. And she was not the type to slack up on the intensity of the exercises simply because she would end up enduring a greater amount of it. It was an admirable trait that he imagined would make the world a more efficient place if it were shared on a greater scale.

He did not envy her the exhaustive work it must have taken to head such physically geared assemblies. Even in his long-past youth, Albus was a scholar before anything else, having no great ability when it came to athletics. And it looked now that he had chosen for the best, for he surely would not have had the energy for his studies if he had joined in with such activities.

It felt appropriate somehow that she would learn the truth when she felt as if she had nothing left to give.

"Miss Potter," Albus said solemnly, regarding the exhausted child almost trembling in one of the visitor chairs in front of his desk.

He hardened his heart.

"I regret to say that there has been a detail of grave import I have yet to inform you of."

If there was one person in this world who Draco Malfoy knew for certain that he despised, it was Heri Potter. Blasted Potter who snubbed her nose and chose Hufflepuff of all Houses! Ruddy Potter who humiliated him and chose tubby Longbottom over him! Fucking Potter who undermined his power-plays time and time again! Miserable, damned, beastly, wretched, infuriating shrew of a bitch who had enough gall to usurp his birthright as the heir to the House of Black and then turn around and coerce his own mother into her schemes!

Draco hated her! He hated her more than anyone he could think of! If he could live to see her brought low he could die happily in that instant! When the Dark Lord had instructed him to spy on her to better learn how to destroy her, he had been over the moon!

Since the start of school year, Draco had been covertly keeping an eye on her, keeping track of her as per the Dark Lord's orders. Draco had eyes on her whenever he could get away with it inconspicuously, and his ears were forever to the ground, listening for even the smallest, insignificant details. He had been commanded to have Potter under surveillance, and he wasn't about to muck it up and incur the Dark Lord's wrath.
Draco had only heard stories of the glory days of the war and of the Dark Lord before, but the extent of his temper hadn't been given its due. Oh, Draco's mother had hinted heavily that it was formidable, and his father had actually shuddered at the thought, but those descriptions paled in comparison to what Draco witnessed in what should have been the comfort of his own home.

So, no, Draco wasn't messing around any longer, he wasn't going to bungle what was an arguably simple task — one of the easiest that the Dark Lord had assigned to anyone — and bring down dishonour (at the very least) upon his family. He had seen the torture and suffering the Dark Lord bestowed upon anyone who displeased him (even Severus), and if Draco was to see his family live to ascend to the rank in the Dark Lord's kingdom as they were promised, he had to do his job properly.

But, oh, Potter was as slippery as a freshly spawned salamander! If Draco hadn't known better, he would have thought she was evading him on purpose! He didn't know how she did it, but the only times Draco was 100% certain where she was were when she was in public places — and that wasn't even most of the time. He would catch glimpses of her off and on, but whenever he tried to tail her she would disappear on him. There had actually been a few times where she had turned in to a long corridor that was completely free of any exit save the end of it, and when he went to follow after her she was nowhere to be seen! If there were hidden passageways that she was using Draco had yet to find any of them.

Potter had to be leaving the castle grounds somehow, whether with permission or not. There was no other possible way that she would be able to escape Draco so otherwise. The question that came with that conclusion was: where was she going and what was she doing there?

Draco soon came to the conclusion that she was getting out and about with full permission from the school. Why else would Dumbledore ask for her presence so often? They were obviously up to covert operations in an attempt to oppose the Dark Lord! Well, they were leaving on ministry business at the very least — Wizengamot related judging by the official-looking owls Potter had been receiving — but they were surely trying to sway the rest of the governing body to a more anti-Dark state of mind! And who knows what else? Draco had been living with his father long enough to know that the rate of Potter's disappearances from grounds did not perfectly coincide with the session schedule for the Wizengamot.

But such information was apparently not at all what the Dark Lord had been expecting.

"It is fully obvious to anyone who pays attention that the old fool is involving Potter in something outside of petty ministry business!" the Dark Lord had thundered as he held Draco under a torture curse. "I want the details, little Malfoy! Exactly what are they doing? What is their schedule for doing it? How can we best sabotage their efforts? Better yet: capture the girl outright and deliver her to me! Are you so incompetent that you cannot handle such a simple task?!!"

And so the perimeters of his assignment had been expanded to kidnapping Potter as well.

Draco had the appropriate amount of fearful respect for the Dark Lord — it had been battered into him if nothing else — but Draco wasn't sure if the Dark Lord completely realised what it was that he had told Draco to do. Aside from being damn near impossible to tail for some reason, Potter was almost constantly surrounded by her sycophants; was monstrously strong to the point of insanity; had gone toe to toe against the best of Europe's schools and had won; was now leading the equivalent of an army who had been trained to follow her orders in a blink; and if that was not enough, she had gone against the Dark Lord himself and had survived without lasting damage. Never mind that the school was under Auror security now and that Draco had yet to beat her in any sort of confrontation between the two of them yet — loathe as he was to admit it even to himself.
Kidnap Heri Potter? Why not just tell him to kill Dumbledore?! The chances of Draco achieving such things were more or less the same!

But Draco had to. His father was already on thin ice because of his lack of effectiveness at countering the political manoeuvring of Dumbledore's crowd, and his mother had fallen to disfavour when she begged the Dark Lord to not give Draco the Dark Mark while he was still in school. It was only by the grace of the fact that the Malfoy family was indispensably useful that their lord's wrath had not become the end of them. So Draco would take on his daunting task, but he now lived in constant dread that he would one day receive news from his lunatic Aunt Bellatrix that his parents "proved themselves to be traitors by no longer serving their lord in all ways as they should have!" and that Aunt Bellatrix herself had killed them if not their master himself.

Months of no results in any of his endeavours had Draco exhausted and visibly anxious. No matter what tail he pinned on Potter they came back empty-handed. No matter who he eavesdropped on they had no notion of what she was doing beyond what he already knew. Not ever her stupid clique knew anything!

It was getting to the point where Draco was wondering if he would be better off just offing himself to save himself from the painful death he was sure the Dark Lord would give Draco when he came to know just exactly how much of a failure Draco's efforts had been. And then Draco wouldn't have to witness his parent being killed either . . . yes, maybe he should just —

The sound of voices and footsteps made Draco falter in his stride.

Draco had been wandering the school listlessly in a futile attempt to find Potter once again. He had already given up all hope of success, but he wasn't about to be accused of not doing his duty to the Dark Lord by one of the other Death Eater children in Slytherin. Any such speculation would lead to the punishment of his parents, and goddammit, they were all he had. If patrolling the school would spare them any amount of pain, Draco would do it. It was this determination that had seen him wandering towards the Astronomy Tower and stumbling upon a conversation.

"— you sure you're quite alright, sir?" Draco heard someone say.

That voice. That was Potter's voice!

Draco flattened himself against the wall and strained his ears breathlessly.

Was this finally something? After all this time?

"Thank — dear, I'll — just fine —" was the distorted answer Draco just made out over the distance.

Good lord, that was Dumbledore! Draco knew that wizened, absent-minded timbre anywhere! He was hearing a conversation between the Dark Lord's main opposition!

"—ly two left, and I'll bet my left leg Nagini is one of them. He's suspiciously protective of that thing for a man known for his lack of warm emotions," said Potter, her tone taking Draco aback with how low and dark it was.

"I do agree, my dear," Dumbledore answered. "I suspect Hufflepuff's Cup may be the other. It would follow the pattern shown."

"He is rather predictable, isn't he?" Potter scoffed. "No doubt he gave it to another Death Eater as he did with the diary. All we have to do now is to figure out which one that is."
"I believe we would do best to look within his Inner Circle. For all that Voldemort is arrogant in his command of his followers, he would not trust any less member than his hand-picked favourites for such a task."

"Well, there was Malfoy the elder, so who else? I don't exactly know his minions by name."

Draco belatedly realised that the voices had grown closer. If he wanted to escape detection he had to slip away now before Potter and Dumbledore discovered him.

Were the gods finally smiling down on him? This was just the sort of information that would put his family back into the Dark Lord's good graces! Objects of great importance to the Dark Lord were being investigated, and if Draco was understanding it correctly, they were being hidden by high-level Death Eaters like his father. No doubt they were instrumental to the continued existence of the Dark Lord; the Light side would not be bothering with such things otherwise.

Surely this would appease the Dark Lord, surely he would be pleased that Draco had discovered such a plot! All Draco had to do now was owl the news home and everything would be alright again!

...  

So why was he hesitating?

As the sound of footsteps and voices drew ever nearer, Draco thought hard on what he had to do.

Draco's hand flashed out and caught Potter's wrist as the two turned the corner. The girl jumped and pulled out her wand, and Dumbledore made to step in front of her.

"Please," Draco croaked, his vision blurring with tears of exhaustion and fear. "Please . . . He has my parents. I haven't been able to talk to my mother in months. Just . . . Please . . ."

It was clear by the nonplussed looks on their faces that this was not at all what they had been expecting, but Draco didn't care.

". . . Malfoy . . . ?" Potter said slowly, looking thrown and distressed.

It seemed the bleeding heart he often mocked her for bled even for him. Her free hand came up to cup his face and wipe away his tears. It was the softest touch he had received in a long time.

"Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said very seriously, "I hope you understand exactly what you are asking right now."

"Anything," Draco replied, his head hanging low. "I'll d-do anything at all, just . . . just . . ."

"This is no conversation to be having in an open corridor," Potter said tersely, drawing Draco to her and nudging him to walk with them. "Shall we use your office, professor?"

And so Draco Malfoy defected from the Dark side. He may have hated Heri Potter, but Draco loved his family more.

Two months into the new year, Severus Snape arrived at Malfoy Manor for an Inner Circle meeting. After the meeting was adjourned, the manor was placed in total lock-down, ejecting anyone not a Malfoy by blood or marriage. When the phenomenon was investigated by outraged Death Eaters at the behest of their lord, the Malfoy couple were nowhere to be found.
I hope you lot appreciated the bit of technical talk about stones and crystals during the conversation with the scrying stone. I'm certainly no jeweller or scientist and it took me more time than I'd like to admit to make it sound like anyone knew what they were talking about. As it is, please don't go digging into the actual science of crystals and stuff, because I'm pretty sure that if anyone took a closer look, my BS-ing would become very apparent.
While doing some frivolous research to get some inspiration, I discovered that Mr. Riordan has a series about Norse gods as well. And it's in the same universe as his Olympian and Egyptian gods. I facepalmed pretty hard at just now learning about it. I was tempted to research more deeply into The Kane Chronicles and the Magnus Chase series, but . . . God damn! Here I am taking forever just to write a HPPJO crossover; I don't think I could handle an even larger expanded story!

Obviously the other pantheons still exist within this story as well, but I don't think I'll be including characters from the canon pantheons outside of "oh, yeah, they exist, but over there" since that would mean me having to read those books as well to get a proper feel for their personalities. I have enough trouble getting already-involved characters enough screen-time; I won't be adding to the line-up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Heri shifted in her seat and sighed quietly, the discreet action going unnoticed in the din and activity of the hall. People were bellowing across the way at each other, gesticulating furiously, the circular table having erupted into various disputes happening all at once. In the face of the angry tangents taking place, no one noticed the agitated but innocuous motion of Heri readjusting the fingers of her gloves over her knuckles.

"FIVE SETTLEMENTS ALL OVER THE ISLES HAVE BEEN HIT IN JUST THE LAST THREE MONTHS!" a man somewhere to her right roared. "ST. MUNGO'S HAS RE-EXPANDED THEIR EMERGENCY ROOM TO HAVE ENOUGH SPACE FOR ALL KILLED AND INJURED! We're on wartime curfew again and you think we still have time to hem and haw around?!!"

"DON'T YOU SCREAM CASUALTY RATES AT ME, WINTERBOURNE!" A grizzled older warlock hollered back. "I'M THE ONE ACTUALLY ATTENDING TO THOSE PEOPLE WHILE COWARDS LIKE YOU JUST COWER IN YOUR HOMES WITH YOUR THUMBS UP YOUR LAZY BUMS!"

Good thing Heri had sent Ollie off with the house-elves when they had arrived or else the sweet thing would no doubt be quivering in fright under Heri's chair at all the raised voices.

It was a week and a half until the year-end examinations — examinations that sixth-year students like herself thankfully didn't have — but instead of preparing herself for the frenzy that was inherent to the End-of-Term schedule, Heri was knee-deep in the middle of a raucous gathering of Britain's semi-divine.

Heri's announcement to 'the Order of the Oddfish' (as Luna liked to call it) had been met with all sorts of disquiet at the time. When the word had been sent home to family, the perturbation spread until it felt like all of the United Kingdom had come to know of the depths of depravity that Voldemort had accomplished in his mad scheme to become an immortal despot. This was, of course, not the case — but it was certainly something remarkable that the collective malaise of those in the know was so great that it stretched its reach to also hang overhead of the masses who were yet left
unwitting. The unease had been churning and curdling like carton of spoiled milk being shaken until someone had finally had enough and demanded a gathering so they could decide what the Hell was to be done if anything could be done at all.

And so on a Hogsmeade weekend when she should have been picking up a new roll of stationery or floo-calling Dora about 'Big News' the older girl had hinted about in her most recent letter, Heri was instead on a "club field-trip" at Castle Sween: the ancestral home of Clan Macmillan, and the location that had been designated for the assemblage. A portkey had been arranged for the students of Hogwarts with the permission of the headmaster, and all of them save the handful who were told to stay at school by their parents were transported directly into the reception hall of Castle Sween.

The bulk of time so far had been used up by 'discussion' on the current state of affairs of the ministry and the actions being taken to combat the resurgence of Voldemort's rise to power. There were not as many people of divine descent in influential positions as Heri had originally assumed — only a handful including herself were seated in the Wizengamot — so there was quite a bit of explaining on what went on during legislative sessions and how the DMLE was being organised.

"—Shacklebolt's been working under the muggle minister for a while now. Heard him say the other day how the Muggles have been calling that attack in West Country a hurricane. A hurricane of all things! Mind you, with those Giants uprooting everything and bashing in buildings—"

"—did in Amelia Bones! Her poor niece orphaned again, bless her! If it wasn't bad enough that the blasted dementors turned traitor—!"

"It's 'bout time that Fudge got the boot!" a man from the Auror Office said at one point. "I thought that committee for cleanin' out corruption would never get to him an' his ilk at the rate they were goin'! Mind, I'm not too sure about Scrimgeour either 'spite his approach. I'm all for keepin' up morale, but this 'everythin'll be right as rain!' shite hasn't actually done anyone no good, has it? Oh! Right! Just follow this easy step-by-step tutorial and thing'lls be swell!

"Have you lot read these rubbish instructions?" he continued, tossing something down on the table with disgust.

The 'rubbish instructions' in question was a purple leaflet emblazoned with the words:

— issued on behalf of —

The Ministry of Magic

PROTECTING YOUR HOME AND FAMILY AGAINST DARK FORCES

The wizarding community is currently under threat from an organisation calling itself the Death Eaters. Observing the following simple security guidelines will help protect you, your family, and your home from attack.

1. You are advised not to leave the house alone.

2. Particular care should be taken during the hours of darkness. Wherever possible, arrange to complete journeys before night has fallen.

3. Review the security arrangements around your house, making sure that all family members
are aware of emergency measures such as Shield and Disillusionment Charms, and, in the case of under-age family members, Side-Along-Apparition.

4. Agree on security questions with close friends and family so as to detect Death Eaters masquerading as others by use of the Polyjuice Potion (see page 2).

5. Should you feel that a family member, colleague, friend, or neighbour is acting in a strange manner, contact the Magical Law Enforcement Squad at once. They may have been put under the Imperius Curse (see page 4).

6. Should the Dark Mark appear over any dwelling place or other building, DO NOT ENTER, but contact the Auror Office immediately.

7. Unconfirmed sightings suggest that the Death Eaters may now be using Inferi (see page 10). Any sighting of an Inferius, or encounter with same, should be reported to the Ministry IMMEDIATELY.

It went without saying that dissatisfaction was heavy amongst those who had no true say in how the Ministry of Magic was opposing Voldemort.

"Muggles are getting suspicious," groused a fierce-looking Welsh woman sitting to Heri right. "My brother-in-law works as an Obliviator, and he's been complaining about the extra work going around now to make sure every single Muggle that's seen anything gets the wipe. Says he once caught the end-tail of a broadcast they get on one of those picture-box things and their witch-burning churches were carrying on about 'signs of the apocalypse'!"

Dissatisfaction was surpassed when it came time to rehash exactly how Voldemort was still within the land of the living. 'Upset' was an understatement when Heri explained all she knew of Voldemort's abominable actions and the scope of what he had done just to continue existing, never mind the devastation he was now wreaking across the United Kingdom. Being wizards as well as of divine descent, they knew intrinsically of the existence of the soul — they knew while religious followers merely believed — and for someone to so remorselessly mangle their own in an attempt to achieve a perverted form of unending life actually made those with weaker stomachs vomit.

To mutilate your own soul . . . and in the way Voldemort did . . . it was as depraved as someone manually rending open their own chest cavity, snapping off a rib to spear someone through the skull with it, and then strangling a sleeping child to force them to consume a pulpy chunk of your own still beating heart.

Some of those present had ties to the Death Eaters, either close relatives or 'friends' that were being swayed. Any tentative attachments they still had to those relations were now regarded with all the horror one would have had at the suggestion of cannibalising an infant sibling.

Heri didn't have it in her to tell them that she was also one of those abhorrent artifacts. Just the knowledge made her skin crawl and her stomach churn, made her yearn for death if only so she would finally be separated from the disgusting contamination fouling her physical body. To actually voice such a revolting thing . . . no. No, to actually say it aloud herself was beyond her.

She would do her duty, but she wasn't obliged to reveal the foulest details of it.

At the moment, they were in the midst of screaming match over . . . Heri didn't even know what. Vigilante justice maybe? Something about asking for help from other countries? Heri could barely
recall the words that had been spoken only a few seconds before, forget about who or what had actually instigated the topic.

Heri was feeling wretched beyond words at the moment, yearning desperately for a Headache Relief and the comfort of her bed. Hell, a serviceable patch of grass would be fine enough as well. This meeting couldn't have been called at a less opportune time unless she had broken both of her arms and had a wendigo gnawing on her rear. Oh, sure, she had been given a week's notice, but that didn't change the fact that she had ran herself ragged the day before with her usual duties and then fretted well into the night with the headmaster about how they would extract Hufflepuff's Cup from the Lestrange vault at Gringott's.

Since learning from Auntie Narcissa that Bellatrix had been tasked by Voldemort to secure an object at the same time that Malfoy Senior had years ago, Professor Dumbledore had been certain that the Lestrange vault was the location of the last of the Founder's relics. Ever since, they had been plotting. It just so happened that their plotting had gone on longer than usual when Heri suggested using her phantom form to phase through the walls of the bank. That had prompted a call for a demonstration and then experimentation on what her limits were.

She had gone to bed bone-tired that night, but she hardly got a wink of sleep because her mind refused to stop scheming about her eventual bank robbery.

And if that wasn't enough, she had caught Felis Nigrum, a magical strain of influenza*. How she managed to do so when it was almost summer and literally no one else around her was sick was a mystery. Madam Pomfrey had ascertained what it was just that morning, though she was not at all pleased to discover that Heri had actually been ailing from it for nearly a week already before she had been sick enough that even she thought she needed to see the nurse.

Give her break! How was she supposed to have known it was anything other than her usual Not Good™? She had been Not Good™ for nearly two years now!

Heri was currently a shivering, sniffing horror. Her head was visibly swimming from how dizzy she was despite the fact that she was currently sitting down. Her eyes were glassy and off-focus, streaming with tears that resulted from how sensitive her vision now was and the absurd amount of hideous aching she had all over her body. Under the cover of her scarf, her nose was a glowing red from constant abuse from tissue wiping, and her lips were a dried, cracked, and bleeding mess that no amount of water consumption could stave off.

She felt as if she were about to die at any second.

As it was, she felt as feeble as her usual appearance made people think, and she now appeared twice as pathetically weak than she usually did. Heri didn't want to imagine how disillusioned the others currently present must have been feeling by seeing her this way. She would have signed over half of her trust fund for a Pepper-Up Potion if only so she could be somewhat presentable, but the Fire Seeds and liquorice in the potion would react badly with the St. John's Wort and Maidenhair in her narcolepsy medication.

In the mean time, Heri had to make due with a bottle of aromatic smelling salts that Madam Pomfrey had prepared for her. She was to inhale it whenever she felt dizzy, nauseated, or faint. She thought it made her look like some wimpy Victorian-era maiden — especially paired with the mooncalf gloves she wore — but she couldn't deny it was effective. (Moly was a Hell of an herb.) It wasn't curing her or anything, but it did relieve her congestion and kept her alert. She was actually thinking of making the prissy little tube a permanent part of her daily carry-on since it worked remarkably well in keeping her awake and focused whenever she took whiff, perfect for staving off a sleep attack.
A screeched slur pierced Heri's sensitive ears with all the tenderness of metal pike through the prefrontal cortex. She couldn't hold back her wince nor the following glower at the woman at the other side of the table who was on her feet and pointing at a man standing across from her, also gesturing aggressively. When the woman actually made to leap across the table and strangle the man —

"AAAGH! What is this?!"

— Two tenacula shot across the room in a blink and caught the two opponents, lifting them up and suspending them in the air so that they could only kick impotently.

"That's quite enough of that," Heri growled out, the scratchiness of her voice adding savagery to her tone.

Silence filled the hall as Heri was bent nearly in half from the force of her hacking coughing, her two captives being flung about in the air from the motion.

"Now," she rasped, voice now breathy and lacking the afore grittiness. "Anyone who tries physical assault again will be flung from the hall. The same goes for anyone else who thinks it's a good idea to blow out everyone else's ears with any more inane shouting."

The vehemence of her glare might have been dampened — literally and metaphorically — by the flow of tears trickling down her cheeks. She wiped the tears away with exasperation only to have them replaced soon after.

Where was Namtar when she needed him?! The one time she would be sincerely thankful he was a gregarious stalker and instead he had disappeared back to wherever he'd come from!

"Miss Bainbridge, Mr. Mordaunt," she continued when no one spoke, addressing the two people still squirming in her grasps. "May I assume you are willing to oblige?"

At their wary nods, she slowly and gently lowered them to the floor.

"Thank you very much," she murmured perfunctorily, assuming Position No. 27, the one she used as a prefect to address unruly upperclassmen: hands folded in front of her, spine perfectly straight, shoulders back but relaxed. "I apologise for intruding into your conversation in such a way, but this hall amplifies sound quite a bit, so any voice raised with . . . enthusiasm . . . well, I'm not very well at the moment, so the increase in volume does me no favours."

"What magic is this?" breathed Ernie's father, Lord Macmillan. He leaned forward in his seat and peered at her with fascinated eyes, his expression mirrored in many other faces.

"Again I apologise," Heri continued on, retaking her seat, forcing her mouth to enunciate properly despite how slack it felt. She took a quick sniff of her smelling salts. "I'm unaware of the protocol for using god-given powers in polite company, so I hope you will all forgive me for taking advantage of a benefit of being my father's daughter."

"You found out who claimed then, Heri?" chirped Nigel Wolpert**, a third-year, a legacy of Apollo, and one of the lads that flocked with the Creevey brothers. He looked at her with excitement. "Which god is it?"

Heri blinked slowly for a moment at the change in topic, her brain not quite able to process what had just been asked. 'Who claimed her'? Had Nigel not been at the Second Task where everyone else had seen the—?
Wait. Heri frowned in confusion, the disjointed flickering of her train of thought making her head feel even heavier. Had that even been Nergal's symbol? For all Heri knew, it could have been her mother's sign. Had they ever actually decided what the symbol had been to begin with?

"Lord Nergal symbol isn't a war hammer, is it?" she said after a moment, voice thick and a little slurred, the question directed more to herself than anyone else.

Silence even more profound than before filled the hall.

"The Devourer of the flesh of Man?" a matronly older woman eventually wheezed, her hand pressed to her chest. "W-what?! How?"

Chatter suddenly broke out again, now all directed at Heri. She could only sit helplessly as wave after wave of rushed words washed over her, befuddling her even more as she fought to keep track of who was saying what.

"—said she was Greek—!"

"—never had a child—"

"That doesn't even—!"

"LORD NERGAL?! Merciful Mer—!"

"—can't be true!"

"Back off already!" she heard Zacharias bark from her left.

Lifting her bleary eyes to her left, she saw her friend standing at his seat and leaning aggressively on the table. There was a fearsome scowl on his face that didn't waver even when offended glowers were sent his way.

"She's doing poorly enough without you lot clawing at her!" he continued hotly. "Have some respect for the ill!"

"And who are you to tell us what to do, runt?" sneered an older boy who looked a bit like Marcus.

"Zacharias Smith," Zacharias replied haughtily. "Son of Pheme, and I've known Heri since we were first-years. When I say you back off of her, you back the Hell off!"

"Ooooh!" the older boy taunted. "A child of attention-whores! I'm sooo scared!"

Lord Macmillan glowered fiercely.

"Mind you language in presence of children and ladies, Pummell! I won't have it in my house!"

"And I won't have snotty little sods up on their high horses when people who actually know what they're doing are trying to get things done!" Pummell snarled back.

"Wow . . ." drawled Michael Corner, a Ravenclaw boy in Heri's year and a legacy of Hypnos. He lifted his head from where he had been half-napping on the table and sleepily gave Pummell an exaggerated impressed look. "I didn't know only a handful of years beyond the age of majority and an apprenticeship with a metal-worker made someone an 'adult who actually knows what they're doing'."
Pummell looked primed to take a swing at Corner, but any action he might have taken was prevented by another tenaculum flying out and swaying like an agitated cobra defensively in front of the younger boy. Pummell tensed like cornered prey.

"I appreciate your frustrations, Mr. Pummell," Heri croaked mildly, not acknowledging the way the tenaculum sprouted a scorpion-like pincer and snapped at the air, "but I think we're letting our tempers distract us from what we're trying to accomplish here."

Pummell grudgingly retook his seat, his eyes still glued on the serpentine appendage bobbing in the air.

"I will accept a few questions if it would please you," Heri said to the gathering at large, sniffing into her scarf. "But I hope you will be so good as to humour me for my little cold and go one at a time if it's not too much trouble."

She shook her head a bit in an attempt to wake herself up more. The room spun dangerously and tipped on its side. Whooaaa . . . bad idea.

Heri uncapped her inhalant again, tugged down her scarf so that her nose was free, and breathed deeply for several seconds. The room returned to a stable state.

Heri then spent the next few minutes — well, she said 'few' to word it civilly, but it actually wasn't 'few' by any definition of the word — answering questions from appropriate to invasive. Everyone and their grandmothers wanted to know the nitty-gritty of being the first known Anunnaki godborn since the fourth dynasty of Ancient Egypt, before the Great Pyramids were built. The inundation of inquiry became a veritable deluge when she thoughtlessly let it slip that she was twice-blessed as well.

"A twice-blessed godborn," breathed Nathaniel Carmichael, Eddie Carmichael's father. He had stars in his eyes and reverence written all over his face. "The British Isles haven't seen one since the Olympians migrated to the Americas nearly a century and a half ago . . . ."

"Not a proper one since longer than that!" someone else exclaimed. "The last one to actually have two parents was back when the Statute of Secrecy had just been enforced!"

Heri couldn't say she understood the fascination — she was the equivalent of a four-leaf clover in a patch of three-leaves: rare, but not any different in a way that was really mattered. Alright, so, yeah, Nergal was an elder Being that originated from a far-off universe who was more eldritch abomination than worshippable god (and apparently also the basis of Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, but she wasn't telling anyone that), and her Olympian mother was likely someone of unusual significance if Namtar's respect of her was anything to go by . . . but that didn't translate to Heri being any different than the standard godborn. Right? There was only so much that a mortal creature was capable of, and Heri was as mortal as anyone else. Sure, she could do certain things other humans couldn't — the same thing could said for various magical creatures; semi-sentient appendages, intangibility, superhuman strength, and whatever else were nothing too extraordinary when it came to non-human Beings.

The others present seemed to disagree with Heri's opinion though. Indeed they were so impassioned in their insistence that her circumstances were far from inconsequential that it actually made Heri wonder if it was actually she who was being unreasonable. She wasn't as educated about the goings-on of godborn culture as well as someone who had been steeped in the workings of it from infancy, but she had thought she had a reasonable grasp on it for the most part. She was now starting to see that what she had thought she understood was only just the tip of the iceberg.
Heri actually witnessed awe blooming on Zacharias' face as she came clean about what she had discovered of her heritage. Zacharias — her self-important friend who was notorious for his lack of any esteem for other people, who always counted himself as amongst the most important people in the room if not the most important person.

'You're a godborn like the rest of us here,' he had told her back in fourth year, shrugging and looking dismissive as always. 'Just thought you should know.'

In all the years she had known him, he had never once given a tinker's damn about how Heri stood out outside of how it benefited his own standing.

Zacharias Smith was now in awe of her.

She took another hit of her smelling salts to prevent herself from fainting dead away in shock.

Eventually, the questioning slowed down enough that Heri could reintroduce a different — and arguably more important — topic: soliciting assistance from other countries.

Contrary to what Heri had originally assumed when she heard someone bringing up the option of foreign aid, it did not mean inciting the ministry into contacting foreign governments for military backup. That option actually wasn't viable at the moment since the only way to do so would involve Britain formally declaring war against Voldemort's terrorist group, and to do that required the full ratification of the Wizengamot — something currently impossible since there were Death Eater sympathisers on the Wizengamot. No, 'help from other countries' in this context actually meant reaching out to the godborns in Europe and Asia and convincing them to fight with those in Britain.

"I don't understand," Heri said after sitting through a bout of back and forth over who they could contact and how to convince them. "Why don't we just ask the gods for help? They're good with answering the prayers of their children, right? They did it all the time in the history books!"

"If only it was that simple," Mr. Carmichael replied ruefully. "While they are known to intervene occasionally nowadays, we aren't Muggles, so I'm afraid divine intervention is off the table in this instance. Unfortunately for us, You-Know-Who has at least two legacies that we know of for followers."

"What does being a Muggle or otherwise have to do with anything?" asked Heri, looking put-out.

"Well," answered Mr Carmichael, looking quite like a professor, "I trust you already know that wizards and Muggles do not interact with the gods in the same way. While wizards and wizarding godborns are free to know of the existence of all the pantheons and give loyalty to whomever they want, Muggles are to remain ignorant, and the godborns born from Muggles are only allowed to know about and interact with those their native gods allow. Muggle Greeks and Romans have been forbidden to know of each other's existence since the fall of Grindelwald. Conversely, muggle godborns are free to call for divine aid in battle whenever they want to, but wizarding godborns can do no such thing when their opponent is another godborn."

"What?" Heri gaped. "Why?"

"It's because wizards intermingle in all the pantheons," Mr. Carmichael explained. "We have since before written history. When it eventually came time for the gods to remove the knowledge of the truth of their existence from the Muggles, it was the wizards who helped the gods of magic to weave the Mist — the spell that has been hiding the reality of the divine from those not meant to know. As a reward, wizards were given the right to choose which gods we follow if any at all, no matter what pantheon our families are already aligned with."
The problem with that, though, is the conflict of interest when it comes to godly intervention. A god meddling with or possibly harming a godborn within their own pantheon is easily forgiveable by their kin, but to do the same with one from another pantheon is inexcusable — it's viewed as encroaching on another pantheon's domain, a point of contention for millennia now. And with a wizarding godborn it's almost always assured to happen. In a legacy's family tree there will often be at least two or three gods, and rarely are they all in the same pantheon.

"It was eventually decided best for everyone involved for all gods to agree to never interfere in confrontation between wizarding godborns, thus never running the risk of incurring the offence of another deity. To do so now would be to breach the treaty and would start a war amongst the gods."

Heri wanted nothing more than to bang her head against the table out of sheer frustration.

"But how can there not be an exception in this case?" she argued. "Vol— He is trying to murder his way into taking over all of the British Isles — and the rest of the world afterwards I'd wager! His followers bloody-well worship him as if he was a god, the ones who are legacies, too, no doubt! It's not like we're having friendly duels over here! And it's not like they're restraining themselves to only harming wizards!"

"They are not inciting divine intervention," said a portly gentleman sitting across from her. "We are free to wage wars against each other and use our blessings so long as we don't drag the gods into it. There's no basis for the gods to punish them."

"Wouldn't the sheer cheek of choosing a false-god over their comrades and progenitors be incentive enough to wipe them from the face of Earth?"

"That's a fine argument," the man continued, "but you're forgetting the part where wizards are free to choose whomever we want to worship, false-god or not, against our people or not. It doesn't matter that You-Know-Who isn't a god right now, because he could eventually become one given enough followers who actually prayed to him. It's through the power of our veneration that the gods were sustained despite losing their muggle worshippers, a magical apostle being worth hundreds of non-magical ones. It's actually how the Celtic gods were formed — the Tuatha Dé Danann. They weren't divine originally but they eventually ascended because the devotion they received from their Druidic followers."

"And we're just okay with that?!" Heri demanded, wide-eyed and alarmed. A Dark Lord turned into an actual god! Voldemort turning into an actual god! The thought made her want to vomit! If he became a god, no amount of horcrux destroying would kill him!

"While it's a possibility, it's not actually likely," Mr Carmichael said, jumping back in. "What Smethwyck hasn't said is that You-Know-Who's following is actually rather small — unsurprising really since not many wizards are willing to kill and torture in cold blood, even amongst the blood supremacists. Of course I don't mean a small group of mad-men — any group of those no matter how little the number is already too many — but if we were to think of them as a cult of worshippers, there wouldn't be enough of them to even trigger the first state of transition.

"Of course, we're only speaking as if his followers gave him worship at all. From what I've seen, the only one of the Death Eaters to be properly reverent is Bellatrix Lestrange — the others follow him to further their own twisted agenda, not something that will carry a person into godhood. The only way You-Know-Who could ascend in any degree would be for hundreds of wizards to sincerely give veneration to him, something he prevents himself by . . . well, by himself. People aren't wont to worship their tyrants no matter how terrified they are of them."

"Alright, so it's highly improbable," Heri agreed reluctantly, still highly bothered. "But the gods
would be okay with it happening on the off-chance that it did? Wouldn't they want to stomp out the competition?"

"That would be going against the right they gave us to worship freely," said Mr. Carmichael with a sigh. "Unless he were to actively challenge them, the gods would have no reason to involve themselves."

So their only hope of backup were godborns from other countries. . . .

After a few moments of thought, Heri spoke again.

"The Order of the Phoenix has been contacting foreign allies and sending out emissaries to court the help of Beings who might be amendable to fighting against the Dark Lord," she said. "Could we not also ask magical creatures who have allied themselves with the gods to help us?"

This suggestion led to a rather involved round of which Beings would be helpful, which could feasibly be convinced, and how those Beings could be contacted.

Apparently, most magical Beings aligned with the gods tended to flock where their chosen pantheons made their homes. While many pantheons like the Kami of Shintoism and the Armenian Ditsov stayed where they were originally worshipped, there were also those like the Olympians and the Egyptians who migrated because of how they were tied to civilisation. Because of this, the bulk of magical Beings that they'd want to curry favour with were currently settled in North America, specifically the United States.

Now, reaching out to those in the States wouldn't have been too much trouble if it wasn't for the fact that American magical Beings didn't ally themselves with the wizarding nation there like those in Europe did. Instead, they disguised themselves with illusions and intermingled with the Muggles, the ones aligned with the gods included. That too wouldn't have been too difficult to work around if it wasn't for the fact that the MACUSA had it so that their citizens were all but completely segregated from the Muggles, essentially cutting off all contact between the wizards and magical Beings as well. While it wasn't illegal for outside wizards to interact with American Muggles and the magical Beings living amongst them, that didn't mean they'd be getting the grin of approval from the MACUSA by any means.

Not that the godborns of Britain actually had any means of getting in touch with the magical Beings in question anyway.

"This is getting us nowhere!" cried Phoebus Penrose, a gentleman from the House of Commons who sat in the Wizengamot.

It was now nearly eight in the evening, almost eleven hours since the students of Hogwarts had been portkey'd in. She could see on various dull-eyed faces that quite of a few of the other students were regretting coming along. Despite how important it was for all of them to be aware of what was going on, sitting for hours on end while having little to contribute to the conversation was no one's ideal way of spending a Saturday.

"I move that we adjourn here," Mr. Penrose continued, looking around, no doubt seeing the same thing Heri did. "The children are exhausted and there's nothing else we can accomplish this night."

"I move to amend that motion," said a middle-aged witch sitting near Ernie's father. "We should adjourn now but meet again the same time next month. We should have some word back from the Continent by then."
"Do you accept this amendment, Mr. Penrose?" asked Lord Macmillan, the acting chairman for their assembly.

"I do."

"All in favour for the amended motion?"

The ayes were a clear majority.

One could almost hear a collective sigh of relief when the meeting was declared done.

As the students of Hogwarts were being gathered together to be ushered back into the main entrance, Heri didn't miss the deferential nods being sent her way by the departing adults, the murmur of respectful well-wishes as she moved through the crowd to meet up with her classmates.

"It was an honour to meet you, my lady," whispered a viking of a man she paused to greet as he caught her hand in a warm handshake.

"An honour, Miss Potter —!"

"—family owe our lives to you—"

"—never thought I'd ever have the chance—"

On every one of their faces was naked wonderment.

Heri had never liked receiving that look, never enjoyed the back-bowing sense of responsibility that came with it. If there was one thing she had learned from living with the Dursleys it was that if no one thought anything of you, whether you failed or succeeded at anything didn't matter. That was not to say that she wanted to be insignificant like she was before, but being expected to do great things by everyone who knew her name was a lofty and vague standard she exhausted herself everyday to reach.

And that was just from being the Girl Who Lived. 'Prodigy Potter'; 'St. Potter, the Hufflepuff'; 'Triwizard Champion'; and now she had to be 'the Twice-Blessed Godborn' as well? Was it not enough that it seemed every wizard in the world was expecting miracles from her?

Heri was not God! She was not all-powerful! It was only a matter of time before she — before. . .

The only thing Heri knew for certain that she could do was die for them. Even then she wasn't sure if it would be enough.

The return to the school happened with no further fanfare. The students dispersed upon arrival, trickling off to their usual evening activities. While lingering looks towards Heri abounded, none of them made any mention of what was discussed at Castle Sween as they wandered off.

With Zacharias and Ernie on either side, Heri returned to the dorms as exhausted as ever.

The morning the Hogwarts Express was meant to leave for London, a platoon of Aurors flooded into Hogsmeade and assumed control of the station, forbidding anyone from boarding the train, conductor or student. Students were then bundled back into the school when the constable and the school faculty was informed that King's Cross Station was under attack, casualties both muggle and magical still unaccounted for.
Only the next day was it declared safe for students to return home — but instead of the train, they were floo’d out from the fireplaces in the common rooms, the Muggle-borns being escorted to their homes by the Heads of Houses.

While fatalities on the magical side were lower than usual because of the DMLE-alerting system that the ministry had implemented when Scrimgeour entered office, muggle casualties numbered in the hundreds. The muggle media declared it an armed attacked and bombing caused by the IRA.

Three weeks into the summer holidays, Heri and Sirius were to travel to Gringotts — officially because Sirius was going to abdicate his position of Head of House Black and bequeath it to Heri as an early birthday gift, but, in truth, it was because this was the day Heri was to retrieve Hufflepuff’s Cup.

On any other occasion, Remus would have gone with them — Sirius wasn’t very politic when it came to talking to Goblins — but Remus was abstaining that day to instead go inform the Tonkses that he had married their daughter.

"I didn’t even know you two were together!" Heri cried as she clung to Dora in a congratulatory hug, her mood elevated from the funk she’d been in since she had arrived home. "Why am I just now hearing about this?!!"

"Why am I just now hearing about this?" Sirius rejoined, goggling at his best friend.

"Well, it was — it was a bit of a last-moment thing . . ." Remus confessed, looking embarrassed but happy. "I hadn’t intended to pop the question quite so soon, but with the baby coming—"

"BABY!" Heri and Sirius had shrieked in unison, Heri in glee and Sirius in stupefaction, as if he had never heard of such a thing before.

"I’m nearly a month along!" Dora said, grinning and rubbing her belly fondly.

Sirius hadn’t been able to articulate anything else after that, so Heri simply bid their farewells and coaxed him into the Floo.

And so it was only the two of them in Diagon that day, Ollie being left at home with Oona because of the risky nature of their mission.

They were dressed deceptively light in summer-wear and metaphorically armed to the teeth in case of attack. Or maybe not so metaphorically — Sirius had a dental cap on his back molar that Heri had bullied him into wearing which allowed him to breath fire and Heri was sporting a lip cuff that had a silver bead enchanted with a Notice-Me-Not Charm. It was unlikely any skirmish would happen — Voldemort had not yet dared attack so close to the Ministry of Magic headquarters — but Heri had not survived the last six years of her life by being anything less than prepared for the worst. In any case, a Notice-Me-Not would buff her stealth for her current mission.

"O Autolycus, Son of Hermes and god of thieves," Heri murmured under her breath as they climbed the steps of Gringotts, "may I succeed in my appropriation without recourse."

The walk through the entry arch and then the marble doors, both flanked by goblin guards, was met with careful nonchalance.

"Do you need to grab anything from your vault?" Sirius asked idly for the tellers to hear as they passed on their way to the cart entrance to the section of the bank their vaults were in. By drawing the goblins' attention now for such an innocuous thing, they wouldn’t know that Heri was under a notice-me-not, thus ensuring that no banker was suspicious of her.
"Nothing," Heri replied, casually scanning over the crowd of people coming and going. With the notice-me-not, none of them realised she was present even with Sirius being fully visible. She had not known such anonymity in a long time. "I'd love to take a better look at that carving set in the Black vault though."

The goblin that met them at the cart rails wasn't one that Heri recognised despite her previous visits over the years. That was not to say that Heri knew every goblin in Gringotts, but she had been observant enough to realise that this rail was manned by only a handful of goblins at a time and that the ones who were usually stationed here at this time of day were Griphook, Ragnok, and Alguff — the goblin in front of her being none of them.

"Hello, sir . . ." Heri said carefully, unsure if this sudden but possibly trivial deviation in the planning was anything more than a coincidence. "I don't believe we've met before."

The goblin blinked somehow puppy-ish black eyes at her from behind silver spectacles. Heri wasn't sure if it was because of his advanced age but he was actually rather warm-looking and sweet-faced, rather like a kindly grandfather.

"Bogrod, Miss," the goblin said, bowing respectfully. "Ragnok was transferred to another branch."

"I see. Umm . . ."

Heri deferred to Sirius.

"Vault 413 if you would, Master Bogrod," Sirius said, opening the gate for Heri to step through.

On the way, Sirius made 'idle' conversation with Heri about the mines and the locations of family vaults that he knew of. Auntie Narcissa had pounded the information concerning the Lestrange vault into Sirius' brain when she heard of what they were planning to do.

"You wouldn't believe the boasting of that hag Bellatrix back when she just engaged!" Sirius mockingly said at one point, his face twisting in exaggerated distaste. He jerked his chin toward a turn in the tunnels as they passed it. "She couldn't shut up about the Lestrange vault after her beast of a future-husband took her down to show it off."

" 'Oh, and the security measures!' " Sirius simpered in a screechy falsetto. " 'Nothing but the best! They have a live dragon keeping guard!' Narcissa was jealous for weeks! She got her own back though, she rubbed it in Bellatrix's face that Malfoy had Lestrange beat when it came to riches — strutted around a Yule celebration with enough gold on her to feed a village for a month!"

Heri tittered and commented at the right moments, but her attention was focused on mentally mapping the chunks of mine they passed through so that she could find her way back efficiently.

As before when entering a vault, their goblin escort remained outside after unlocking the doorway for them. Bogrod in particular returned to the cart to wait for them as opposed to how others before him stood the door. While Heri would have easily been able to slip behind a pillar to conceal her next moves, it was a boon that she didn't have to be as concerned for stealth off the bat as she had originally thought.

"D'you want to switch rings now or after we rummage through this rubbish?" asked Sirius lazily as he strolled through the hall-like room.

"Mmm . . . now I suppose," Heri replied, looking over a shelf of knick-knacks. "Might as well."
Without fanfare, Sirius removed the ring in question from his finger and tossed it into Heri's waiting hands. She lobbed the heir ring back at him in response.

Sirius eyed her carefully as he went to put the heir ring back on the pedestal it originally came from.

"You want to take a seat over here before you try it on?" he asked, waving at an ostentatious sitting room set over by where he was standing. "That'll sting like a bitch to put it lightly."

Heri rolled her eyes but complied, going over and plopping down in a high-backed armchair.

"I have put on one of these bloody things before, you know. I've done it three times already actually!"

"Right," Sirius nodded agreeably. "But the Black Headship ring is a real son of a bitch."

Heri snorted at his casual use of expletives.

"This is exactly why Professor Snape makes such a sour face when I talk about you," she muttered, sliding the ring onto her right middle finger.

Any retort Sirius might have made was blocked out by the familiar sensation of Family Magic judging her. Wind; needles in her pores; lava in her veins; a pickaxe to the brain: all like before. And just like Sirius had said, it was even worse than what she had previously experienced. Like, to the fourth power worse.

And as before, the torture disappeared as suddenly as it came.

Heri groaned miserably from where she was slumped over the arm of her chair, tears veritably flooding from her eyes. As she shifted to sit up a bit — muscles cramping and joints aching — she tasted bitter copper; she had bitten the side of her tongue.

"How are you feeling?" Sirius asked sympathetically, kneeling beside her and healing the wound in her mouth.

"Ten out of ten agony," she wheezed after her tongue was fixed. "Would suffer through again if a raving masochist."

"Are you going to be alright continuing?" Sirius murmur under his breath, glancing covertly at the door. He had been unenthusiastic about including Heri in the break-in when Dumbledore introduced the idea to him, but there was no arguing against the fact that being able to travel through walls was an act no one else they knew of could recreate.

The sitting room set they were using was partially concealed by a queue of cabinets lining the back of the sofa to the wall. If that was not enough cover, the armchair Heri was sitting in was tall enough to block the sight of her even if she was standing.

"It'll be fine," Heri replied just as quietly after a moment as she observed the signet ring now sitting innocuously on her right middle finger, next to Resurrection Stone on her ring finger. Add on the Potter ring on her left middle and she was only a zebra-print fur coat away from being a pimp.

She shook her head sharply to shake off her wandering thoughts and dug into her pocket for her smelling salts. After three slow inhales she ignored her aching limbs and straightened up fully, beginning to rummage through her other pocket.
In a louder voice, she said, "Have you seen that carving set then? I don't really fancy wading through all this and accidentally getting myself cursed."

Sirius took this as the cue to launch into a jovial monologue about his experiences with cursed Black artifacts and half-heartedly pick through the piles of curios. Heri took the opportunity to extract Iolanthe from her hiding place.

During their planning of the heist, one of the biggest challenges they came up against was how to make certain the goblin escort didn't notice Heri's absence from the Black vault. Even with Sirius' chatter to fill the air, it would be suspicious if Heri was never heard saying a word in response. The idea of a pre-recording was shot down because it couldn't make up for her never being seen moving about, something they also couldn't risk. Eventually, they came upon the idea of using Iolanthe as a body-double.

Getting up from her seat, careful to remain concealed, Heri sat the awaking doll in the seat she had vacated and pulled her wand on the simulacrum. With a silent spell, Iolanthe grew and expanded until she achieved the exact dimensions that Heri had.

Iolanthe blinked owlishly, taking in her sudden change in point of view. Though Heri had practised this spell on the doll before, Iolanthe was still in awe every time at how different everything looked when she was no longer a foot in height.

Sitting in the chair, Iolanthe was a perfect copy of Heri in every way, from the gradient of her hair to the outfit she wore. Because of the experimentation done on her over the years, Iolanthe easily passed as human — Heri had long since achieved a flesh-like texture for Iolanthe's limbs, cold porcelain and obvious jointing being replaced with seamless 'skin'. All that was missing from the disguise to assure no suspicion would fall on her were the three rings still on Heri's fingers.

Heri readily slipped off the Potter and Black signet rings and handed them over to Iolanthe who took them without question. The only thing holding her back from removing the Resurrection Stone from her finger as well was the fact that the last time she had done so she was fairly certain she had nearly died. Oh, well — no one but Professors Dumbledore and Snape, and Sirius, and Remus knew about the Resurrection Stone, so it wasn't like Bogrod would find it fishy not seeing it on Iolanthe's finger should Heri not return in the forty-five-minute time-frame and Sirius and Iolanthe were forced to leave to avert suspicion.

"You know what to do," Heri murmured to Iolanthe, allowing herself to fade into the grey guise of a ghost. "Follow Sirius' lead."

Iolanthe grinned mischievously before shifting her posture just so and affecting Heri's usual mannerisms. Standing up, a wry up-turn of the lips appeared on Iolanthe's face. One hand went to rest on her hip, the other threaded fingers into the fabric of her skirt, as if she were about to hike up the garment and break out into a run: a pose Heri often assumed.

Instinctively, Heri affected the same posture. Face to face, they were mirror images.

"Good luck," Heri mouthed, and then disintegrated into a wisp of mist.

Without waiting to see how their façade was carried out, Heri surged down through the floor, travelling through stone as if it was merely water. Like a flesh-eating merrow circling its prey under a sheet of ice, she drifted under Bogrod's unsuspecting feet and re-emerged far out of his line of sight. Retracing her mental map of their journey to that section of the mines, she then followed the tracts back to the intersection in the tunnels Sirius had pointed out.
Thankfully, it didn't take as long to get there as Heri had originally thought. The tracts into the more secure section were winding and labyrinthine, but she made excellent time in her mist form. On the way she passed dozens upon dozens of other vaults, all with curious security measures of their own: Wardstone embedded doors; magnificent locking mechanisms; stone guardians crouched in wait; et cetera. It was honestly quite amazing to behold.

At last, Heri turned a corner and saw the thing for which she had been prepared, but which still brought all her to a screeching halt despite her in-corporeality.

A gigantic dragon — a Ukrainian Ironbelly if she wasn't mistaken — was tethered to the ground in front of her, barring access to four or five of the deepest vaults in the Gringotts. The beast's scales had turned pale and flaky during its long incarceration under the ground, its eyes were milkily pink; both rear legs bore heavy cuffs from which chains led to enormous pegs driven deep into the rocky floor. Its great spiked wings, folded close to its body, would have filled the chamber if it spread them. Heri could see it trembling slightly, likely from the chill of the caves, and as she drew nearer she saw multiple vicious scars slashed across its face.

"By the gods . . ." Heri breathed, horrified by the state of the creature. In her mist form, her soft exclamation seemed to come from every direction, making the dragon's head twitch about.

In her aghast state, Heri returned to semi-corporeality, catching the Ironbelly's attention. As it turned its great head toward her, it roared with a magnitude that made the rock tremble and spat a jet of fire that sent her shooting up into the ceiling to avoid. The dragon let out another hoarse roar, then retreated.

Heri remained in the cave ceiling, frozen in fright that she had inadvertently brought attention to the fact that a burglary was in progress. Only after a solid minute wherein there was no hint of outside activity did she peek out into the cavern. She strained her ears and felt for vibrations in the stone, but it seemed no one was coming.

Mentally sighing in relief, Heri dove back into the stone and traced down the walls of the cavern. She peeked out momentarily again to check if she was at the right location, confirming the door she was floating in was indeed the one to the Lestrange vault. She hesitated only a moment to eye the battered dragon slumped across the floor and then drifted through to the other side.

Once inside, Heri condensed back into full corporeality.

The Lestrange vault was nowhere near as polished or organised as the Potter or Black ones. From where Heri stood at the entrance, it was merely a cave-like opening crammed from floor to admittedly high ceiling with golden coins and goblets, silver armour, the skins of strange creatures – some with long spines, other with drooping wings – potions in tacky bejewelled flasks, and a skull still wearing a crown.

Heri wrinkled her nose at the cluttered and gaudy mess. With a quick flutter of her wand, she cast a globe of light up into the air so that she could better see around. She then went about examining the piles of objects surrounding her.

Beams of witchlight illuminated things she had missed farther in the back; glittering jewels of exorbitant sizes and a sword that looked remarkably like the Sword of Gryffindor lying on a high shelf amongst a jumble of chains. If she hadn't known very well that the true sword was being kept in the Sorting Hat when Dumbledore wasn't using it to destroy horcruxes, she would have been fooled. A copy? But why would the Lestranges even want such a thing?

A jewelled goblet on a shelf caught her eye. Eagerly, she cast her eyes about the room for
something she could use as a step-ladder. She found an ornate fiddleback chair in a corner and dragged it over. Climbing up, she could just reach it on her tip-toes with her arm fully extended.

Could this be —?

"Aargh!"

Heri screamed in pain and the goblet tumbled from her grip. As it fell, it split, becoming a torrential downpour of goblets. Within seconds, with extraordinary clamour, the floor was covered in identical cups rolling in every direction, the original impossible to discern amongst them.

Heri dropped heavily into the chair, nursing her blistering fingers. The damned thing had burned her! Oh, why hadn't she realised it would have been cursed? Of course, it would be!

It must be Doubling and Flagrante Spells, Heri thought to herself, sucking on her fingers to ease the pain. That meant touching the goblet and its now many copies would cause them to burn and multiply — and she would eventually be crushed to death by the weight of expanding gold!

"Alright then," Heri murmured to herself, getting out from the chair. "No touching it is."

But even as she said it, she accidentally nudged one of the fallen goblets with her foot, and twenty more exploded into being while she hopped on the spot, part of her shoe burning away from the contact with the hot metal. Cursing violently, Heri went semi-corporeal and flew up into the air, the only way left to avoid touching the cursed chalices.

She directed her wand at the bubbling pile of goblets, twirling cautiously in the air. Were she to land, it would have been impossible not to brush up against anything; she had accidentally sent a great cascade of Galleons onto the ground when she was hopping about, and now they joined the goblets, the glowing gold blazed with heat. The vault felt like a furnace. The heat from the enchanted treasure rose in waves, and sweat trickled down Heri's face and back.

Heri's gaze passed over shields and goblin-made helmets set on shelves rising to the ceiling as she flew up to escape the rising gold. Higher and higher she went until suddenly she spotted an object that made her heart skip and her hand tremble. She directed her globe of light towards it so that she could see it fully.

This was Hufflepuff's Cup. She could feel the soul inside it as she had with previous horcuces.

The little golden cup sparkled in the spotlight: the cup that had belonged to Helga Hufflepuff, which had passed into the possession of Zacharias' ancestor, Hepzibah Smith, from whom it had been stolen by Tom Riddle after he had murdered the poor old woman.

Without wasting a second, Heri landed on the shelf-top and returned to corporeality, wiping sweat from her brow, careful not to touch anything nearby. Avoidance was easy since the shelf-top was all but empty save the cup and a rubied silver flask. Working quickly, she dug inside her robes once more and drew out her basilisk fang slingshot and an Expanded black silk pouch.

Edging closer to the cup, Heri held the slingshot by its gilt-edged crown and hooked the sheathed tip on one of the handles. Gingerly, she then hoisted it up and into the awaiting pouch. The pouch greedily accepted its burden, the cup sliding in without a snag.

When Heri was certain the relic was secured, she heaved a sigh of relief.

Hyped up on adrenaline, Heri grinned to herself and punched the air. She had done it! Now all she had left to do was return to the Black vault. Well, after she did something about all the Doubled
objects — Vanishing maybe? After that, she'd be free to return home and eventually meet up with Professor Dumbledore so they could destroy—

A thought occurred to Heri.

A horcrux was made by inserting a sliver of soul into a vessel. Heri had inherited from her godly father the ability to consume creatures and absorb their beings into herself. She had on two occasions already consumed amortal spirits — a dementor back when she rescued Sirius and Professor Binns in fifth-year.

It could be possible that she could also . . .

"Namtar," Heri called out with intent, a keen look in her eyes.

A shadow spread out from a shelf opposite of where Heri was seated despite her witchlight not wavering from its location. Tendrils of darkness billowed out like a cloud of sooty smoke, fingers of black reaching out to her. With a surge mist, Namtar condensed into being and bowed lowly where he floated.

"My lady calleth?" crooned the eerie psychopomp.

"Could I consume this shard of soul?" Heri demanded right away, shaking the silk pouch intently.

Namtar glanced down at the object being waved in his face. He then observed her quietly for a moment with a curious look on his unsettling face.

". . . Aye, my lady," he answered at last, his tone quiet and serious.

His unusual response gave Heri pause. She drew the pouch back into her chest and cocked her head in consideration.

"What would happen if I did?" she asked slowly. "The cup would stop being a horcrux, right?"

"The vessel would indeed become without a soul once more," Namtar replied, inclining his head. "And yet . . . in truth I know not what would become of my lady should she englut such a loathsome morsel."

"What do you mean?" Heri questioned warily.

"'Tis the way of the Anunnaki that we take upon ourselves likenesses of our consumed. Mayhap my lady would want to think further if she would be eager to take upon herself traits of this being, this bitter foe."

". . . Are you saying I'll end up similar to Riddle in some way?" she asked, looking appalled. "But nothing like that happened before when I ate that dementor and my history professor!"

"Spirits and souls share much but differ greatly," Namtar corrected gently. "Ghosts and spectres may fulfil hunger, but no true substance have they. In opposition, a soul be the entirety of a living creature, the true body that controlleth the vessel. To consume a soul is to take in the entirety of another being."

"I suppose that makes sense . . ." Heri agreed reluctantly. "So I would be best off just destroying this thing like planned then?"

"This servant would ne'er presume to dictate the actions of your ladyship," Namtar replied,
neither agreeing nor refuting. "I seek but to ensure my lady be aware of any and all possibilities. Mayhap the shard shall gift you what endowments your foe did amass throughout his years as in the way of others our kinsmen. All one, it shall ne'er more know the ways of the living."

Heri huffed. Always with this double talk!

"Isn't the point of all this to make sure Riddle finally stays dead?"

Namtar actually shrugged!

"Death is but the release of a soul from the mortal coil so that it may rest 'till it is to live again should it be found worthy," he said. "Should my lady consume this being, it shall ne'er live again. No longer shall it be."

Oh.

Oh . . .

She . . . Heri didn't know if she could — well, even if she could, was that something anyone should —? To erase a soul, even Voldemort's soul.

". . . Would you be alright with that?" she asked eventually, staring hard at the pouch in her hands. "I mean — I don't want him to hurt anyone any more or . . . or continue spitting on the sanctity of death — I dunno. It's your domain, right? I don't want to muck up how the life cycle works or anything . . ."

From Heri's understanding, once a person perished, their soul would return to some version of the soul cycle depending on who they worshipped or whose domain they died in if they didn't worship any god at all. From there, their spirit would face judgement and their soul would be wiped clean of their previous life. Depending on the belief system, the soul would either be sent back out directly to live again — as with Hinduism and Buddhism — or linger in the afterlife at the discretion of the gods that ruled the underworlds.

As someone who had always been a stickler for the rules of morality, Heri felt rather strongly about maintaining the relationship between souls and the afterlife. She was a daughter of an underworld god after all. She was a bit curious what would happen if she ate Voldemort's shard, but she wasn't sure if she would feel right interfering in a system that had been in place since the beginning of existence, never mind what might happen to her after absorbing such an evil thing into herself.

"Tis no matter to this Namtar should this fractured soul no longer be," said Namtar, distracting Heri from her thoughts. "A drop of water may ripple the pond, but our kinsmen did glut themselves 'pon the souls of Man from the time we did know it to be in our power; souls were consumed with nary a thought. Reality and the Universe are not so weak that to remove but a single soul from the cycle would cause an irreparable break."

Heri eyed him suspiciously.

"So it would actually be fine if I did it?"

Namtar regarded her very seriously.

"In sooth, this world will be as unencumbered as ever it hath been, yet what would become of you I know not. To take a soul unto yourself is to know. My lady would know all there be to know as if she did learn all herself. In regards to this soul . . . would such intimate knowledge of this soul's
being suit my lady's sensibilities? This servant knoweth not."

To know the whole truth of Tom Riddle, of the abominable things he participated in and perpetuated under the banner of Voldemort . . .

Heri's grip on the pouch wavered.

"No."

Heri tightened the drawstrings on the pouch and knotted them decisively.

Namtar accepted her answer with a respectful incline of his head.

"Shall I escort my lady to where she will travel next?" he asked.

"In a minute if you want," said Heri, shifting where she sat so that she could climb on her feet on the shelf-top. "I have to take care of this mess of jinx'd rubbish and" — here she checked her pocket-watch — "Bugger! I have to make it quick or I'll be late getting back!"

Heri had less than ten minutes to return to the Black vault before Sirius and Iolanthe would be forced to leave without her.

Heri flew down and began Vanishing goblets and fake Galleons frantically, but, to her dismay, it seemed they were bewitched to Double instead of disappearing. She cursed as the pile of scorching gold rose higher instead of diminishing.

"Ugh!" she groaned and turned to the personification. "Is there anything you can—?"

Before she could finish her sentence, the cursed treasure was reduced to ash.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in shock, blinking rabidly. "W-well — thank you! Yes, this is a lot easier to Vanish!"

A final sweep of the vault made sure that everything looked as untouched as it had before Heri had arrived. With five minutes left on the clock, Heri burst into action to complete her mission.

Heri's heart clenched as she bypassed the dragon once more as she was leaving, but there was nothing she could do for it unless she wanted to very publicly escape from Gringotts on the back of a dragon — destroying property as she went — thus completely negating the whole point of a covert operation to begin with. She hardened her heart and continued on her way.

She flew back into the Black vault with half a minute to spare.

Upon arriving, Heri could see that Sirius was fidgety and troubled aside from his devil-may-care façade. He checked his watch compulsively and heaved an unhappy sigh, drawing Iolanthe's attention.

"Looks like it's time to go, kiddo!" Sirius said in a bright tone. "Any later than this and we'll be caught up in the lunchtime rush!"

Iolanthe hummed a sound of agreement, but her face was as upset as Sirius' would have had he not been forcing a smile.

Oh, but Heri didn't want them to be worried any longer! The mission was a success, they shouldn't be so uneasy any longer! Not knowing how to get Sirius' or Iolanthe's attention without drawing the notice of Bogrod as well, Heri moved on instinct and possessed Iolanthe.
Iolanthe's body jerked before straightening up again suddenly, her eyes wide and her mouth forming an 'O'.

It was a curious thing, possessing something. By all rights, Heri should have felt right at home in Iolanthe since the doll was a perfect copy of her. But no, she could feel the difference. It was as if she was dressed in a full-body glove, there was a sense of separation from the world that one did not get in one's own body. A layer of film clinging to her skin. And while she could move all of Iolanthe's limbs with ease, there was this sense of delay between what she directed the limb to do and it actually taking action; a minuscule delay to be certain, but still unsettling.

"Heri?" said Sirius, looking confused.

Despite her disorientation, Heri grinned and nodded.

"It's me," she mouthed. "I'm here!" This was promptly followed by a cheery, "I'm fine! Just remembered I need to get some owl treats for Hedwig too."

Sirius looked both baffled and incredibly relieved at the same time.

"Is that right?" he replied, ruffling her hair affectionately. "We'll drop by Eeylops on the way then."

With Hufflepuff's Cup in tow, they left Gringotts with tired but satisfied smiles on their faces.

A month and a half into the summer holidays, the British godborns met up again to discuss what reply they had gotten from their counterparts on the Continent. To their dismay, it seemed none they had contacted were willing to get involved with Britannia's Dark Lord problem. As a last ditch resort, it was decided that the godborns would reveal themselves once more to the Isles so that those who would fight would be bolstered by the piety actively directed towards them.

On her seventeenth birthday, all of Britain came to know that Herakles Potter was the daughter of a god. It took less than a day for the news to spread throughout all of Europe, eventually reaching the ears of the Americas and Asia as well.

For all who looked to Heri to save them from Voldemort, the revelation was heaven-sent. In homes all across the world that knew the terror of Voldemort, the people prayed for their deliverance.

Chapter End Notes

*Felis Nigrum Flu is actually canon, but I tweaked the name into Latin because it's hard to take a disease seriously when it's called Black Cat Flu. The Daily Prophet reported an outbreak of it in Britain in January of 1996, so I thought it would make sense for my weakened-constitution Heri to catch it at some point. Have you noticed that canon Harry never seemed to get sick? I thought it was odd that he never got any of the illnesses his peers caught despite outbreaks of sicknesses being common at schools.

**Do any of you remember Nigel Wolpert? He's movie-canon and was introduced to take the role of both the Creevey brothers in the later films starting from the 4th film (If I'm remembering correctly).
**The Power the Dark Lord Can Never Wield pt. 2**

Chapter Notes

And this is the last of my pre-written chapters! The up-coming chapter (13) will be going up at the same time here as it does on FF.net. After that point, I will officially be open to suggestions for the future arc, but please remember that I already have things planned out, so I might squeeze in things you suggest, but if it doesn't work with my outline, it won't happen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Up on the third floor of the hidden Number 12 Grimmauld Place, within a spacious but cosy bedroom painted a soothing blend of dusky violet and orange, tucked up on the window bench overlooking the misty early morning street, Heri Potter was fast asleep with some needlework resting in her lap, a gentle beam of sunlight falling across her face from the part in the curtains. All was still and quiet save for the muted *tick-tick-tick* of the wall-mounted clock, the soft *whoosh-shh* of the breeze flirting through the open windows, and the sleepy melody of the enchanted music-box Heri had been gifted the year before.

Across the carpeted floor was a scattering of newspapers half-gutted and in disarray from how they had been flung to the ground. Peeking out from underneath each other, headlines like **Thirteen Obliviators Killed During False Underage Magic Alarm; Muggle Minister Targeted for Assassination**; and **Metro Massacre: Ogres in the Underground**. Panic was written on every page, articles one after another discussing the bedlam befalling the nation, magical and muggle.

With the impish wind, a four-legged lark flew in through one of the windows. Transforming into a Snowy Owl as it landed on its perch near a table laden with crafting tools and supplies, the heavy beating of its wings brushed against a mannequin adorned in pinned cloth and displaced yet another newspaper, sending it to slouch at the base of the window bench. Though the paper was drooped over where it sat, the headline emblazoned across it was clear as day:

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**DAILY PROPHET**

* Wizarding Britain's Premier News Source *

(August 9, 1997)

**HERI POTTER: THE CHOSEN ONE?**

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The accompanying article followed in a similar vein.
By On-Site Reporter, Ellisanore Hocus-Canticle

Gossips continue to fly about the recent resurfacing of Britain's godborns in response to You-Know-Who's return from the grave and his current terrorism against the wizards and Muggles of the British Isles. It was just last month that several families once famous for their godly heritage and new faces alike staged a public press conference to proclaim their ancestry and their stance against You-Know-Who, boosting public morale. Since then, Britain has fallen into a fervour of spiritualism and mad speculation about what can come from such bold opposition from a previously self-isolated group.

Amongst the spiritualism and speculation, the name "Heri Potter" has been a hot topic as ever. The Marchioness of Swetechester, Lady Herakles Potter-Black — commonly known as Heri Potter — the only person ever known to have survived the Killing Curse, and Britain's national treasure, publicly came out as a godborn as well on her 17th birthday.

"There is no longer any time to be coy in our capabilities and intent," Miss Potter declared in her press release that prompted the Daily Prophet's special edition evening paper on the 31st of July. "It's subtlety and double-talk that had our nation so confused and unaware during [You-Know-Who]'s first disgusting climb to power. I'm not ashamed of who and what I am, and I'm not going to let what-ifs intimidate me into keeping quiet."

Whether her intention or not, wizards across the Isles have taken the revelation with a shocking amount of zeal. It has been accounted that altars — public and private alike — are being built all around the Isles for her edification in hopes to empower Miss Potter for any future confrontation between herself and You-Know-Who. There is also talk of similar actions being taken by citizens of neighbouring nations as well. (see page 3, column 4)

When later interviewed and asked about her opinion to such a vehement reaction, Miss Potter stated, "It's humbling beyond words. That people would place such faith in me . . . I hope I can do enough to be worthy of it all."

When questioned on her specific line of descent, Miss Potter's press team — other known godborns — intervened and refused to comment.

"It's not something a decent person goes shouting around town," admonished Healer Hippocrates Smethwyck, Current Healer-in-Charge of the Dai Llewelyn Ward of St. Mungo's Hospital. "Outside of very specific situations, to declare one's progenitor is synonymous with throwing down a gauntlet with no provocation — something arrogant and over-reactive. And to ask of it from a semidieous person is to imply that said person is incapable without their progenitor backing them."

When the reporter who originally posed the question apologised, Miss Potter graciously waved it off while saying she too was "new to the nuanced etiquette." While Miss Potter decidedly did not reveal her parentage, she did disclose — with Healer Smethwyck's approval — that she is directly of the Greco-Romantic and Sumerian-Babylonian pantheons.

"A Twice-Blessed is a rarity!" asserted Cuthbert Mockridge enthusiastically, retired Head of the Goblin Liaison Office. "Miss Potter is a ray of unexpected hope in these troubled times."

"A ray of unexpected hope" might be a severe understatement if the most recent rumours are true.

Modest pubs and government offices alike have spun into a frenzy of natter about the recent leak that not half a year after the outbreak from Azkaban back in January of 1996 there was a
disturbance at the Ministry of Magic — specifically the Department of Mysteries — during which an agent of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was captured and interrogated.

"We're not allowed to talk about it, don't ask me anything," said one agitated Unspeakable, who refused to give his name when he was questioned.

Nevertheless, highly placed sources within the Ministry have confirmed that the disturbance centred on the fabled Hall of Prophecy. Though Ministry spokeswizards have hitherto refused even to confirm the existence of such a place, a growing number of the wizarding community believe that the Death Eater now serving his sentence in Azkaban for trespass and attempted theft was attempting to steal a prophecy. The nature of that prophecy is unknown, although speculation is rife that it concerns Miss Potter — investigation of the leak revealed that she is on record to have had an appointment within the Department of Mysteries not long before the break-in occurred. Some are going so far as to call Miss Potter 'the Chosen One,' believing that the prophecy names her as the only one who will be able to rid us of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

The current whereabouts of the prophecy, if it exists, are unknown, although (ctd. page 2, column 5)

Not far down the page was another article boldly titled: London Bridges Are Falling Down: Drivers and Pedestrians Suffer a Watery Death. Underneath was an account of the destruction of multiple bridges around London by attacking Death Eaters. Muggles were confused and didn't know who to blame, though there were several fingers being pointed at such groups as the Spanish Liberation Group ETA and the Islamic Fundamentalist Cell Al-Hiraza. Xenophobia amongst the Muggles was growing, and the condemnation of the "decadent Western lifestyle" for causing such "punishment" was on the climb.

If one were to retrieve the newspaper from where it was slumped and looked it over, they would see suspicious wet blots dotting the page.

By now, the other occupants of the house had begun to wake up, the clatter and creaks of doors and footsteps reaching the remote third-floor bedroom if only in muted tones because of the distance. Heri did not stir, her slumber as deep as a bear in hibernation. One set of ears in room reacted though, twitching and wriggling as their owner blearily cracked their eyes open and yawned widely.

Oleander the bogle sat up in the nest of pillows and plushies that was her toddler-sized bed at the foot of Heri's own. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she climbed down from the mattress and stretched until her pointed ears flapped and she was stood on her tip-toes. Sighing contentedly to herself, she then padded quietly across the room to the door and left for the washroom.

Soon after, Ollie came trotting back carrying a silver tray supported with her head. On the said tray were two corked bottles, an empty glass tumbler, a small basin of water, and a facecloth. She transported said tray and contents to a side table next to the window bench and then made to rouse Heri.

"Miss Heri~!" Ollie said in her chirrupy voice, climbing up onto the bench. "Miss Heri must take her potions now!"

Heri remained unperturbed, snoozing on.

Ollie puffed out her cheeks in a huffy pout but did not let herself be deterred. Carefully removing the half-knitted baby onesie from where it sat, she draped herself across Heri's lap to take its place.
"Miss Heri must wake up now!" Ollie insisted, tugging on Heri's nightgown, booping her head into Heri's belly. "Lots to do today! Lots of people to see!"

Still no reaction.

Sighing, Ollie sat up and crawled away until she was at the side table again.

Beside the tray she had put there was Heri's bottle of salts. It had come to the point where waking Heri up in the mornings was damn near impossible, so the concentration of oils had been upped to the point that it would make a fresh corpse kick (Maybe — possibly — they hadn't actually had the chance to test it). Ollie still gave normal means of waking Heri the old college try, but she would unswervingly end up using the inhaler.

With one wave of the bottle under her nose Heri's eyes flew open with a jerk of her head, the back of her cranium slamming into the window frame.

"Holy mother of—!" Heri hissed, her hands flying up to grab at the area of impact. "Aargh!"

Ollie hovered frantically, flailing her hands and dancing in place with impotent concern.

"Ollie's sorry!" the little hob squealed. "Is Miss Heri alright?!

Heri blinked misty, hazy eyes at Ollie, a hand going out to pet the panicking creature on her fluffy head.

"O-oh, it'ss al-al-ri-ght . . . " Heri stammered thickly, blinking rapidly. "I-I-I'll be— I'll—"

Heri stopped and took in a few slow breaths to calm her stuttering. In three counts . . . out three counts. In again . . . then out.

"I'm . . . I'm fine, Ollie-dear," Heri eventually reassured, rubbing her eyes. "It's my own fault for — falling asleep at a window."

Heri was subdued in her awakening. Her dreams had been heavy with unsettling images and angry garbled speech she only half remembered now. A battle of some sort, she concluded, though the simple moniker of 'battle' felt grossly insufficient. Devastation; blood; panic. Buildings gutted, littering the streets; people everywhere, some scrambling for safety, others unmoving in the rubble; shrieks and screeches — some in horrible glee, but most in desperation. Had someone been screaming her name . . . ?

The details slipped ephemerally from her recollections despite how she endeavoured to gather them, but the sense of horror lingered still.

A nightmare? Maybe. She had certainly known no lack of bad dreams these days. She had been reading the papers quite avidly lately, and there was no shortage of devastation being reported on. But, somehow . . . She'd never been the imaginative sort — any potential for it had been stamped out early — and this one felt far too real to have been a simple figment of someone's imagination; too raw.

Caught up in a fit of sombreness, Heri slowly got to her feet, her head heavy as lead.

As she downed her potions and shook off the last vestiges of sleep, Heri resigned herself to Ollie fussing over her a bit longer, even humouring the smaller girl as she made to dress Heri as well. When both were suitably clothed for the day, Ollie was hoisted up in a piggyback and they moseyed their way down to the kitchen.
The sound of a Jefferson Airplane track playing on Sirius’ well-preserved gramophone reached their ears as they descended the last set of steps.

'want so-omebody to lo-ve?/ Don't you ne~ed so-omebody to lo-ve?/ Wouldn't yo~ou love so-omebody t—a~?'

The well-loved kitchen — situated a floor below ground-level — was a far sight more cheerful than it had been when Heri had first moved in. Marbled granite counters and shelves stretched across three of the walls, a line of white wooden cabinets taking the fourth. The walls and floor were tiled a perky cream colour accented with white at the doors, windows, and floor mouldings. Everything within had a freshly-cleaned gleam to it, and the warm smells of breakfast being cooked and the music playing in the background incited a feeling of homeyness it certainly had never known when Sirius had been growing up (not that his mother had ever lowered herself to have her family eat in the kitchen). Compared to the decrepit pit it had been not five years before, it was like day and night.

A long, polished table was situated in the middle of the room, already loaded buffet-style with breakfast fare — pastries, fruit, sausages, juices, et cetera, all on tiered displays. Sirius and Remus were already present and seated — the former deep into a large cup of black coffee, tapping the table to the beat, and the latter making love to a plate of strawberry Danishes drizzled with chocolate. Meanwhile, Oona — their motherly house-elf — came over from the stove and set another platter of eggs on the table, Vanishing an empty plate into the sink with a snap of her fingers.

'Your eyes, I say your eyes may look like hiiiiis—'

"Are we expecting a crowd this morning?" said Heri as she passed through the open door, working up a small but sincere smile at the scene in front of her.

Oona snapped to attention immediately, squeaking out, "Good morning, Young Mistress!" and bobbing in a curtsey. This was followed by a couple of sleepy greetings as Ollie was deposited in a chair.

"Good morning, all," Heri replied as she pressed kisses onto the cheeks of her two guardians, forcefully banishing any lingering melancholy. "A crowd then?"

Sirius surfaced from his coffee enough to shrug and blindly grope for a croissant.

"A few of us are off to France for the day to meet with some sympathisers," Sirius said. "It's an early portkey though, so I told them to come 'round for a bite here so they could get a few extra minutes of shut-eye."

Such a venture was par for course for Sirius' and Remus' usual duties for the Order. This was not the first time nor would it be the last that they were sent to rally support from the Continent. Though the British ministry could not officially seek foreign aid yet, The Order of the Phoenix had had their fingers prodding the sides of their international friends for quite some time now, taking advantage of the reach of influence a notable amount of their current members had. Already the diplomatic team had been sent out to other neighbouring countries such as Belgium, The Netherlands, and Norway. There had been talk of heading for Bulgaria and Ukraine soon as well.

This often left Heri home "alone" (with at least one Order member on guard duty and whichever of her friends popping in for the day), but she had long since early childhood learned how to keep herself productively occupied when left to her own devices.

"Is it alright to leave when Dora's like this?" Heri asked idly, helping herself to a bowl of porridge.
Since Remus and Dora had officially married, Dora had moved in with them — the couple might have gotten their own house together if it hadn't been for how dangerous it was now, especially for known members of the Order of the Phoenix. As it was, Sirius had knocked down some walls and set the newly-weds up in a bigger space than the one Remus had originally occupied, essentially a flat of their own, taking up half of the second floor. They had originally been offered the entirety of the second floor, but both Dora and Remus said it was too much.

Remus laughed a bit.

"She may be off active-duty at the Auror Office," he said, "but she doesn't need any hovering just yet."

"Oh, but . . . hasn't she been getting morning sickness lately?" Heri fretted, seating herself across the table from Sirius, next to the happily chomping Ollie.

"What's this about morning sickness?" came Dora's voice from the door. The young mother-to-be still in her polka-dot pyjamas sauntered into the kitchen, hips swinging as the next song started up, baby-bump swaying.

'Oone pill makes you larg~eerr a~a~nd one pill makes you smaaall./ And the ones thaaat—'

She plopped into the seat next to Remus.

"I didn't think it would be a topic of breakfast discussion."

Sirius made a repulsed face at the thought.

"Ugh, it certainly isn't! I demand we talk about something else!"

"Have you decided on a name yet?" Heri asked, perking up, offering Dora a plate of melon.

Dora snorted around the yoghurt she was tucking into, accepting the melon with a nod.

"What's the rush? We aren't due for months yet! Baby Lupin can wait 'til we find out if it's a boy or a girl."

"Oooh, but don't you have any possible names flitting around your head at least?" Heri lamented, stirring her bowl with discontent.

Honestly, Dora had to be the most laid-back mother-to-be to have ever existed! Oh, yes, she was happy about the baby, but it was as if all the usual cares of having a child was lost on her! Who in the world waited until the last minute to think of a name?

'And if you go chasing rab-bits—'

"I swear, you're more excited for this baby than we are," Dora replied, smirking. She continued when Heri rolled her eyes. "There's the standard combination we can use if it's a boy, of course. Somethin' Remus Lupin. Maybe Romulus — that'd be a laugh."

"'Romulus Remus Lupin'?" Heri recited disbelievingly, making a face. "You'd just be making fun of him! Any more leading, you'd have to name him something like — like 'Wolfgang'!"

"Ah! Now, why didn't I think of that one? 'Wolfgang' would be a riot too!"

Heri groaned and sent Remus an imploring look. Surely he was sensible enough to avoid naming his child what was essentially 'Wolfy McWolfie Werewolfson'.


"Don't look at me," Remus said with a shrug, looking uncomfortable with the casual references to his condition. "I suggested 'Edward' after her father, but Dora says it's an old man's name and won't hear of it."

"And . . ." Heri almost didn't want to know. "And if it's a girl?"

"We won't be going my mother's route, that's for certain," Dora said around a gobful of toast. "The Black route, I mean. No better way to invite snobbery or eternal hatred from a child than pin them with a moniker that was uppity even back when it was invented."

'When logic a~and proportionss have fal-len sloppy deeaad—'

"There's nothing wrong with your name, Nymphadora," Heri admonished, clicking her tongue. "There are worse things in the world than being called 'a gift from the nymphs!'"

'—membeerr what the Dormouse sa~aaaid—!'

"Easy 'nough for you to say, little Miss Herakles," Dora retorted, turning her nose into a snout and wriggling it imperiously. " 'Glory of Hera' indeed! Now there's a badass name — Nothin' frilly or delicate about that! If they wanted it to sound any more warrior princess, they would've had to name you 'Xena!'"

"It's technically a boy's name," Sirius chimed in, grazing through the sausages. "Lily an' James were expecting a boy of course — first-born Potters were always lads for as long as anyone can remember."

"I suppose divine assistance trumps any bloodline quirk," Remus commented idly, reaching for a pitcher of juice as the record reached an instrumental piece.

Heri's spoon paused where it was poised in cutting into a strawberry.

" 'Divine assistance?' she echoed, her heart jumping into double-time. "What do you mean?"

Remus and Sirius looked at her and then each other in surprise.

"Did we not tell you before . . . ?" Remus asked slowly, looking vaguely apologetic. "I mean — Well, there's a reason we weren't surprised by your big reveal you know."

". . . I did wonder," Heri acquiesced. She had been perplexed when her two guardians didn't react with more than a look of sudden-realisation and a proud hair-ruffle for her when she followed through with her part of the godborns coming out of hiding. She eventually chalked it up to the matter-of-fact way wizards were about the gods and the two's lack of hero-worship towards her.

"Erm, yes — in hindsight, we might have known," Remus continued. "Your parents invoked the gods for a child. I don't know the nitty-gritty details, but they decided to do a ritual for a baby."

"But why?" Heri asked, mystified. "Why didn't they just have one the normal way?"

Heri had done her very best 'til then to think as little as possible about how she was conceived. Beyond the usual ick of acknowledging her parents had physical relations, there had still been the very real possibility that infidelity was involved in some way despite how both of the late Potter couple were blood-related to her. Not wanting to have any reason to think poorly of her late parents, Heri never followed along that train of thought outside of the first revelation.

It was Sirius who answered this time.
"Well, Heri . . ." he began awkwardly. "Many of the old lines don't really have the best track record with having kids despite how . . . well, how much effort they put into it. The plain and simple of it is that we don't breed at the same rate Muggles do."

Considering how long-lived wizards were and how much more resilient to damage they were, their slower birthrate was little surprise, made sense even — nature wouldn't promote overpopulation after all. Still . . .

"The Weasleys have seven children all within three years of each other," Heri pointed out. "You yourself had a younger brother not that much younger than yourself, and you have three first-cousins."

"Yes, well, the Weasleys have never been the sort to fuss over bloodlines despite how old their family is, and my generation of Blacks didn't exactly come naturally either," Sirius replied, running a hand through his hair in agitation. "Andromeda and her sisters were born two years after each other thanks to what I was told was a disgusting amount of 'effort' and fertility potions, and you can bet your broomstick that their father was none too pleased that they all came out girls. Reggie came along thanks to a ritual himself, albeit not one to the gods — and even then he was so sickly as a child that my parents feared he'd die before he'd reach school-age. The fact of the matter is that intermarrying with strictly other pureblooded lines for so long does the birthrate very little favour."

"But my mum was Muggle-born!" Heri protested. "And the Potters weren't blood-purist . . . were they?"

"My dad's Muggle-born too," Dora interjected. "And yet I'm an only child. Despite how much of a handful I was, my parents did still want more children."

"Listen," Sirius carried on at Heri troubled expression. "Even without blood supremacy, it just happens sometimes that people have trouble having kids. Your grandparents didn't have James until they were in their sixties! Your parents were probably going through something similar and just decided to make their own miracles instead of waiting around for one."

"They were barely in their twenties when they had me!" Heri refuted sceptically. "That's too young to know they'd have trouble having a baby!"

Sirius and Remus looked at each other helplessly.

"I don't know what to tell you, love," Remus said quietly. "Your parents had their reasons — we just don't know what those reasons were. It's possible they just wanted a baby as soon as possible because of how grim things were looking at the time — maybe they just didn't want to risk dying childless."

"I suppose . . ." Heri responded carefully, tapping her spoon against the rim of her bowl.

An invocation ritual! Those were not something people did just on a whim — even the maddest wizards thought twice! There was no lack of cautionary tales; Heri had read her fill and more from books of folklore and renowned thaumaturgic texts on all the things that could and often did go wrong. Overlooking how rigid and nuanced most of the rituals were — to the point that to make a mistake was to forfeit your life — there were horror stories about offending the gods with petty or unjust pleas. And even if the causes were just, there was no accounting for the capriciousness of the higher powers, no telling if the god invoked would actually fulfil the request or just torment the petitioner for their audacity. Even the most benevolent of deities could be dangerously mercurial!

And Heri's parents had called on a god to ask for a baby? They were lucky they didn't end up
with an eight-limbed demon-spawn that ate its way out of the womb! How had they even dared?

Despite being bewildered at what could have brought her parents to such a decision, a constricting, bleak knot in her guts she hadn't realised was there unravelled. James and Lily Potter had not wavered in their vows — Heri truly hadn't been conceived through infidelity. Though she had never allowed herself to give any credit in such an ugly thought, the confirmation of their faithfulness soothed her in a way she hadn't expected.

Of course, there was still one thing else she wouldn't mind knowing . . .

Heri peeked up through her lashed.

"Do you know who they invoked?"

Sirius shook his head rapidly and decisively, a mortified look on his face.

"That's not something you go discussing! Sure — you can mention doing an invocation after the fact about what for, but you don't go into explicit detail or anything!"

Heri huffed in exasperation. Despite the risks, an invocation was hardly scandalous! Since when did Sirius ever care about propriety anyway?

"Why do you have to be so secretive about it?" she complained.

"Think of it this way," said Dora with a flick of her wrist, a grin spreading on her face. "You know now that Remus and I are going to have a baby, and you intellectually know the mechanics of how that happened — but would you have wanted to be told that we were going to make a baby or want to know the step-by-step process of how exactly the baby was made?"

"Dora!" Sirius and Remus shouted in unison, utterly appalled.

Heri flushed and shoved a spoon of porridge and spiced apple in her mouth.

"It's not the same though," she mumbled mutinously around her mouthful. It wasn't as if every invocation ritual involved coupling!

. . . Right?

"Despite how forward-thinking we continue to grow, we have yet to enter the stage where tantric magic can be brought up over a pint," Dora replied with a shrug.

"That's not what I meant at all!" Heri cried, red-faced and bothered. She spluttered at the laughing older woman a bit before conceding the discussion and shoving a pitcher of juice toward Dora.

"Oh, quit your braying and drink your coconut water! If you have time for talk of tantric magic, you'd be better off ensuring your baby gets the best nutrition possible!"

Mercifully, that line of discussion died a quick and painless death when the expected Order members bound for France that day started showing up. One by one they came pouring out of the fireplace, almost tripping over each other as they exited the floo.

"What's this, what's this?" cried Mr Doge, one of Heri's most avid fans amongst the Order, his fez askew, soot on his nose. "Why aren't you two dressed?! The jam jar's activating in naught but ten minutes!"

There was then a rush of people running around, shoving food in their mouths and talking over
each other in an attempt to convey as much information between them as possible. Itinerary, locations, topics of discussion, and meal plans were all flung through the air as they tried to organise themselves.

"What time are we seeing that Matthieu bloke —?"

"— remember to emphasis the Muggle casualties with —"

"—Nine?! Merlin's beard, we'll be naught but bones by —!"

Eventually — and just in time — Sirius, Remus, and the rest of the diplomatic group were off toward the back garden for their Portkey. Dora was headed for the central fireplace to floo to work, and Heri was pinned with Moody as her guard for the day.

Blessed quiet returning to the house, Heri decided to attend to her own business as well. It was best not to squander the day — even for rumination over the newest revelations about her parentage. Mulling over what were essentially trivialities would have to take the back-burner until there was time to waste.

"What do we have on the schedule today, poppet?" Heri asked Ollie as they made their way up to the third floor, Moody lazily clunking up behind them. She knew she had a few letters she had yet to reply to — one from Celandine, the leader of the Forbidden Forest nymphs, and one from a Mr Icarion Primbrook, another Parliamentarian Magistrate — but that was only the leftover work from the day before.

"Miss Heri has letters from Bramblewood Hall to answer!" Ollie answered brightly, pulling out the pocket-planner she wielded with pride. "Fisken sent along letters from Allie and Lost-boy Luke with his monthly report. Scary Hedwig brought them this morning! Oh, and then . . . and then Miss Heri is to meet with the broom people about the mounts for the cavalry at ten! And after lunch, Miss Heri is to see her Twins in Diagon Alley! And in the evening—!"

"Why didn't you let anyone know you'd be going out in public today?" Moody demanded, cutting off Ollie mid-sentence. "We need to call in more guards for this, lass!"

Heri inclined her head in her polite equivalent of a shrug. If she had known what appointments she had that day, she wouldn't have had to ask Ollie about it in the first place. That's what happened when one delegated responsibilities.

"I hadn't realised all this would be happening today, sir," she answered contritely. "If you'd like, we can call for your back-up while I look over my letters."

Moody muttered to himself about the lack of proper preparation and the dangers of unexpected changes in security detail, but Heri mostly tuned him out. She had heard similar paranoid grumblings many times before.

Heri could appreciate a healthy level of paranoia — especially with how things were currently going — but Moody took it to an extreme she could readily admit was . . . well — extreme. The last time he had been in charge of organising her security for an outing, she had been glamour'd within an inch of her life into a six-foot-tall Ethiopian bloke and had been accompanied by two visible chaperones whilst two others hovered invisibly overhead on brooms, concealed by invisibility cloaks. Honestly, it wasn't like Heri was in hiding or anything! She sincerely appreciated the level of effort and attention to detail it took to come up with such a convoluted means of disguise and protection, but . . . it felt like a bit much for something like an errant trip to the Alleys. Not to mention it took quite a bit of time to set up. In her opinion, her notice-me-not charm'd lip cuff was precaution
Of course, Heri would readily admit that Moody had vastly more experience with such matters, and no doubt knew his business a lot better than she ever would. One didn't survive Grindelwald's domination of Europe during WWII and then Voldemort's bloody ascension — the former as a child and the latter as a front-line Auror — and lived to retire and eventually join a vigilante organisation without having mettle and wit of a rare quality. He had even survived being kidnapped and imprisoned for the length of a school year! Not just anyone bounced back from that — but Moody did, and he came back stronger, quicker with his wand than he'd ever been before she'd been told.

Idiosyncrasies aside, Heri was hard-pressed to name anyone she'd rather have minding her safety. As she had heard Sirius crow before, Moody was "a dwimmer-crafty son-of-a-Gorgon who knows better than any Hit Wizard how to secure a target!" She'd seen him do some down-right evil things to people he thought were a danger to her — the denizens of Knockturn and other seedy folks now skittered back like cockroaches when the lights turned on at the sight of her even when Moody wasn't visibly around.

A hand came up and caught Heri by the bicep before she even realised that her vision was blurring and her knees had buckled. She was hoisted back up-right from what was nearly a nasty tumble down the stairs.

"Steady on, girl!" Moody barked, giving Heri a shake as Ollie waved her inhaler under her nose. "Come on, come on — Eyes sharp, Potter!"

Heri blindly groped the aromatic bottle from Ollie and cupped it to her face with both hands. Shuddering, she breathed it in from both her nose and her mouth, the eucalyptus and peppermint icing over the air she took in. With every inhalation, her brain jolted, as if someone were knocking against her skull from the inside with a hammer.

Steadily, the haziness lifted.

"I'm sorry, sir," Heri coughed, blinking rapidly and rubbing her temples. "My thoughts wandered."

Moody regarded her acutely, both his eyes affixed.

"What's this about then?"

He sounded as pleased as a man who went in for a diabetes check-up and was diagnosed with stage-four cancer.

Hari smiled blandly.

"I surprised you were not told before, sir. I've been narcoleptic for three years now. My case certainly isn't as bad as what others suffer from, but it's still chronic."

With how Sirius, Remus, and even Dora (on occasion) fusssed over her, Heri had thought everyone in the neighbourhood knew — never mind that they'd never met their muggle neighbours.

"This won't do at all, girl, not at all!" Moody declared, a fierce look on his face. "All the guards in the world won't do a lick of good if you end up doing yourself in! What've the healers said about fixing this?"

Hari sighed and resumed her climb up the stairs, Ollie clinging to her hand.
"There's simply nothing for it, sir. Madam Pomfrey fixed me up with these smelling salts" — here she shook the hand still clutching the small bottle — "but there's not any sort of cure that anyone's been able to find. At least not yet. I rarely get the random bouts where I just drop any more because of the medication, but as soon as my thoughts drift I drop off like a stone. It's lucky you headed off the bout just now before I was well and truly out."

Moody's flinty stare said very well what he thought of *that*. He stopped them at the top of the landing, a heavy hand landing to hold her in place.

"You listen here, Potter," he said intently, almost harshly. "This fainting or whatever it is *will not* do. It's bad enough that you bruise like a banana and catch ill like a mooncalf at midwinter! You can't afford being dead-weight when the Dark Bastard and every Death Eater in the country is out for your blood! You can't afford to be a liability like this!"

Heri stilled, her eyes narrowing. Didn't he think she already knew that?! She damn well knew that better than anyone else!

"I appreciate your concerns about this, sir, but—"

"None of that wounded pride rubbish!" He barked. "I know damn well you know exactly how serious things are! Merlin knows you know it a lot better than some of the idiots we're working with! What I'm telling you right now is that you need to get a lock-down on this! WE CAN'T HAVE IT! The whole damned nation's looking to you to get rid of that evil fucker!"

"You keel over when you start daydreaming? Fine! You focus on what's happening in the right-here and right-now, NOTHING ELSE!"

Heri's mouth pinched. She didn't take well to people shouting at her — she never had.

"I'm already familiar with how to hold off my sleep attacks, sir—"

"If *that* was true, I wouldn't have just had to stop you from cracking your head open!" Moody scoffed. "You focus, you hear me? Until you're *dead* or gods-willing he's dead, you don't think about anything else but what's right in front of you!"

Heri's jaw locked together at the abrasiveness she was being assaulted with, the skin on her back tingling from her tenacula itching to burst forth and slam the growling man into the wall. It was only the affection Sirius had for him as a former superior that restrained her from her violent impulse, valid concerns or no. That didn't mean she didn't want to bash his face in, though.

In her peripheral, she could see the shadows of the hallway thickening, creeping out. The light overhead seemed to flicker and dim in response to her ire. Was that Namtar taking offence on her behalf? She was half tempted to let him at it. He had been particularly persistent in his (silent) hovering since their conversation in the Lestrange vault — a target to release his mania on might do him some good.

"You get me?" Moody demanded, squeezing her shoulder, not registering the atmosphere growing sinister around them.

"I understand very well, sir," she ground out, her tone as steely as a tempered blade. "You may be assured that I had already come to the same conclusion you have! Just now was only a momentary lapse caused by thoughts on how we'd be travelling today. Such things usually take more than the normal amount of consideration."
Moody jeered.

"You can be as puffed up as you want, lass," he said, "so long as you get it into that head of yours well and good that you can't afford to be anything less than one hundred percent FOCUSED!"

"I KNOW MY RESPONSIBILITIES VERY WELL, SIR!" Heri shrieked, her fists clenched at her sides.

"PROVE IT THEN!" Moody roared back, getting right in her space and towering over her.

The two eyed each other steadily, two sharks circling each other for blood.

What Heri wouldn't give to sink her teeth into flesh right then! She'd rip another chunk right out of the bellowing brute and spit his blood right back into his face! How dare he shout at her! How dare he lay hands on her! Oh, when was the last time she had been this angry?

(And was it her imagination or were her teeth sharpening behind her scowl?)

Heri had had enough of this farce of a 'discussion'.

"I know my responsibilities very well, sir," she repeated, glowering for all she was worth. "You don't need to tell me twice."

Without another word, Heri whipped around and strode purposefully for her room, tugging Ollie along. After a moment, the clunks of Moody's unsteady gait could be heard again, growing fainter, moving away from her direction. No doubt the surly bastard was off to the floo to round up more guards.

Heri's footfall was thunderous with her agitation, the staccato-like hailstones upon tin. The portraits cringed away as she stormed by, their frames whipping askew in her direction as if gravity had chosen a new centre.

The nerve of him! Taking that tone with her! Talking to her like that in her own house over something that was absolutely none of his hare-brained, jumped-up, vulgar-mouthed business! Oh, if she had her way—!

A vase imploded as she passed.

—He certainly wasn't her father, and if he didn't watch himself, she'd smack that cantripitous, invasive marble right out of his grubby, half-eaten head! She'd grind it to dust under her heel!

Further articulate thought — violent or otherwise — was lost within the magnitude of Heri's fury.

"Miss Heri is very angry now?" Ollie whimpered, half-running to keep up with Heri's pace.

Hearing the wariness in Ollie's meek tone, Heri very deliberately restrained herself, reining in her rage. She decelerated to a stop so Ollie could properly regain her footing. Rolling her shoulders back to rest from their belligerent hunch, Heri slowly filled her lungs to maximum capacity and then just as slowly exhaled, imagining she was expelling everything angry and violent within her along with the air.

A loaded pause later, Heri replied, "I'm afraid I am rather bothered at the moment," in her lightest, blandest tone, making sure no irritation was directed at her little handmaiden. She didn't believe in taking out her temper on uninvolved people, and she wasn't about to change her stance on that principle now.
Everything was fine, Heri told herself firmly. There was no need for all this anger — a petty argument didn't deserve this level of furore. Even if it was instigated by a presumptuous —

No. No, she didn't need this. She was fine. Words and presumptions didn't matter. Nothing mattered! Nothing deserved her attention and energy except taking care of her people and accomplishing her goals. Everything else — offending or otherwise — could wait in bloody line.

Heri imagined bundling up her wrath as if it were nothing more than a used paper bag and then stuffing it away into a bottomless trapdoor in the back of her mind — the place where she buried all her thoughts and feelings she had no practical use for. The thought that she had been making use of said metaphysical dump more often as of late was also shoved in.

A brittle smile eventually made its way onto Heri's face.

"Let's get to those letters, shall we?"

With controlled and measured steps, Heri completed the trek back to her room, finally reaching her desk where the aforementioned letters were waiting.

It was not just the expected letters that were waiting either — sharing Hedwig's perch was another owl, a lovely Barn Owl of ministry make. And making its home on the back of her chair was a proud-looking Eagle Owl, one Heri knew very well.

"Nicolai!" Heri greeted the massive bird, a reluctant smile budding on her face. "I wasn't expecting you again so soon!"

Said bird chuffed importantly but affably, fluttering his wings a bit in greeting.

The charming Nicolai was Viktor's steadfast personal owl, the one who had been conveying their correspondences for the past handful of years. Viktor had said that he had raised Nicolai himself since before the bird was hatched, and he must have done a good job of it since the great creature was more of a familiar to him than a simple post-owl. Nicolai was a Hell of a post-owl too though, no doubt about that — rain or shine, blizzard or gale, Nicolai arrived bi-weekly like clockwork to wherever Heri was staying, never a day behind. He was neck and neck with Hedwig for efficiency and had her beat hands down when it came to being agreeable.

"Have you been well?" Heri asked perfunctorily, setting up a tray of water and treats and offering it to the well-travelled fowl.

Before Nicolai could make any response — not that he was verbally capable like Hedwig was — the ministry owl hooted with affront, as if offended.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss!" Heri answered with a huff. Honestly! Everyone and their grandmother's kneazle was so self-righteous today. "I didn't mean to overlook you."

The same courtesy was offered to the haughty creature and was well received.

With all three owls pacified (Hedwig already occupied with whatever sort of beast she had hunted down herself), Heri turned her attention fully to her post. Beginning to flick through them, she retrieved Iolanthe from her pocket and gave the awakening doll over to Ollie.

"You two can go play if you want," she told the little girl absently, gathering up the leftover mess from yesterday.

Here and there were letters that hadn't required replies . . . under the desk were the quarterly
reports from Mr. Bassenthwaite, her steward, the one who the paperwork from her Heorshire constituents went through — oh, and she'd have to hire on another steward for the Swetechester domain as well, Sirius was primed and ready to wash his hands of it . . . Mmm, a few rough drafts of her missive to the Comet Trading Company about the brooms the DA needed were tucked under a folder . . .

Right! That settled, Heri began sorting the unopened letters between business and personal. There were those letters from Celandine and Mr. Primbrook she had remembered — both going in the business pile — but there was also a letter from Hagrid she had originally overlooked; the triad from Fisken, Allie, and Luke that Ollie had mentioned; the early correspondence from Viktor; and a heavy vellum envelope embossed with a fanciful calligraphy header from the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

Shuffling the letters neatly into their stacks, Heri then took a penknife to the letter from the Department of International Magical Cooperation. (It was best to get the work-related mail out of the way first.)

Ooh, and it looked like Percy was really working his way up the positional ladder — under-secretary to the head of the department already! How good for him. She'd have to visit and congratulate him properly soon . . .

'Honourable Lady Potter-Black', yadda-yadda, — 'our greatest honour to inform you' and more unction; Percy certainly had the Bureaucratese down pat —'have been nominated by former seat-holder' . . . 'International Confederation of Wizards' . . .

Heri's brain short-circuited for a lack of better wording.

She re-read the sentence once more in hopes that she had severely misread what was written.

'You have been nominated by former seat-holder, Jean-Aurelius Lord Wesselton, to the position of Magian of the International Confederation of Wizards.' Unthinkingly, her eyes carried her on to the following sentence. 'After a review of the scope of your accomplishments in the position of Magistrate of the Wizengamot and your exemplary personal merits, the august body has avowed you to be a credit to your nation and do now extend their hand to you in invitation should you so accept.'

Right.

Heri sat heavily in her chair and just ran both hands over her face.

She was tempted to scream at the absurdity. That or laugh hysterically.

What idiot had—? Why had anyone even agreed to—? Heri just turned seventeen but a month ago! Who in all the gods' names was this Wesselton bloke anyway!? Why was he nominating her for anything!? She certainly wasn't acquainted with anyone by that name, baron or otherwise! Of all the ridiculous—!

No. No, no, no. Heri straightened and tucked her intertwined fingers under her chin, closing her eyes and tilting her head back toward the ceiling. No — incredulity at this vacuousness was best off shelved. What she had to do now was decide how to confront such a proposal.

Alright.

So.

Heri had been nominated by an unknown to take up position amongst the British seats of the
International Confederation of Wizards, the magical community's equivalent to the United Nations. As a 'Magian'. And for whatever reason, the Confederation had concluded that such a thing was a right brilliant suggestion and had decided to run with it. A global governing body — of which members were inducted based on their prowess in their fields of work and their steadiness of mind when it came to diplomacy and international cooperation — had decided a twiggy little brat who hadn't even completed her N.E.W.T.s yet was an ideal candidate to join their ranks.

Heri's mind resolutely shoved off her dubiety at the situation and raced with possibilities. She had to think of the bigger picture here, the Greater Good if you would.

Fatuity aside, she could use such a position. She could really use such a position. This was a prime opportunity to strong-arm international aid outside of the legal red-tape surrounding Britannia's justice system. She was no mastermind manipulator, but surely if she could spin it just so . . . and so that it was the foreign dignitaries themselves that were volunteering their nations' assistance . . .

The Death Eater sympathisers within the Wizengamot kept them from the all-in-favour vote they needed to officially brand Voldemort an enemy of the state, inhibiting them from properly declaring war, and thus preventing them from being able to petition for foreign aid. But if the foreign nations offered aid on their own . . . she could bypass the requirement of any prerequisite ratification from the Wizengamot entirely.

And what they'd be able to do with foreign aid! The boost to the Auror ranks alone would be a boon! And if they had a better flow of money to channel—

Of course, she was getting ahead of herself here. Any favourable turn would hinge on her actually being able to nudge the other dignitaries into action, and it wasn't like there weren't already British Magistrates trying to finagle what they could from the Confederation. Professor Dumbledore was the Supreme Mugwump, for goodness' sake! Surely he if no one else had been whispering into a few ears. And all of that was thinking from the standpoint that something could be done in some sort of timely manner before Voldemort overthrew the British ministry or whatever it was exactly that he was trying to do. (Heri wasn't sure if Voldemort really had any concrete goals beyond destruction, genocide, and setting himself up as a dictator — those certainly weren't the standard five-to-ten-year plan.)

Heri resolved to talk to Professor Dumbledore about her options later. If nothing else, he'd be able to enlighten her on how such a recommendation on her behalf came about.

A frown of preponderance on her lips, Heri moved on to the rest of her mail. Thankfully, they didn't come with any of the same weightiness that accompanied the first.

The letter from Celandine detailed how numerous nymphs from neighbouring groves had uprooted and replanted themselves in the Forbidden Forest, declaring their intentions to stand in defence of Hogwarts should it come down to it. Nymphs were generally non-combative, so this was far more than Heri had hoped for on that front. The centaurs were fierce guardians of the area, but there was only so many of them. Celandine came across as rather apologetic that they couldn't be of more help, but Heri made sure she expressed that their contribution was appreciated as it was.

The missive from Mr Primbrook was actually a request for her to back a bill he hoped to get passed at the upcoming legislative session. Unfortunately for him, Heri disagreed with a quite a few key points of his bill, and so would not be lending her support to him. A shame — they usually voted similarly when in court. She worded her rejection as disarmingly as she could, letting him know that it wasn't a bad bill, but it didn't fit into her usual stance as it was at the moment.

And so it went with the rest. Hagrid received a chatty reply to the casual back-and-forth they
forever had going on ("How are your cabbages growing this season? Enoch is unusually fond of
them for a transfigured reptile, isn't he?"); Viktor got the enthusiasm he was due at the news that he
would be taking a break from Quidditch and coming to England for a long-awaited visit (though it
was an iffy time for such a thing); Fisken was granted an expansion to the flow of income for
Bramblewood Hall to support the family he and his newly married wife hoped to create; and Allie
was showered with praise for his first letter written all by himself, a training Snitch tucked into the
return envelope as a congratulation gift.

After nearly an hour of reading and replying, the only thing left was the letter from Luke.

The door of her room creaked open as Heri sat back for a stretch.

"Miss Heri?" Ollie peeped, poking her head in. "Miss Hannah, Miss Sally-Anne, Master Wayne,
Master Zacharias, an' Master Ernie are here to see you."

Heri blinked. Goodness, all of them at once? Even if they did end up congregating at her house
most days, they didn't usually show up all at the same time. No doubt Mad-Eye would be proper
pissed at the increase in their party today as well. It was a mercy Luna, Hermione, Neville, or any of
the Weasleys hadn't arrived as well.

Heri groaned a bit, twisting her head about to relieve some of the kinks in her neck.

"Thank you, Ollie," Heri sighed. "Could you tell them I'll be with them in a few minutes? I'm
almost done here. Oh, and have Oona fetch them some tea."

Ollie retreated with a prompt, "Yes, Miss!"

Hunkering back down, Heri picked up the plain piece of notebook paper with its edges held
together by a staple that was Luke's letter. She ran a forefinger along the shredded edge where the
paper had been torn out.

It had been a while since Luke had written to Heri outside of a reply message. He never seemed
to know what to say. Oh, he was always pleasant and solicitous in his responses, but Heri got the
feeling that he had grown unaccustomed to regular human interaction during his time as a hunted
nomad. He couldn't connect with children his own age any more — too much violence to confront
and a lack of anyone to take care of him and fall back on.

Heri would have liked to say that she understood what Luke was going through, but somehow . .
to say so would demean what he was living through. Yes, Heri has gone through similar trials, and
she knew very well what it's like to be without the care of parents, but at the end of it Heri had never
been homeless — she's never known that stark level of adrift. Hated, neglected, and ill-used by the
Dursleys she may have been as a child, she had never really felt alone, and now she was set up in a
cushy home in her own name with people who unabashedly loved her — even with the shadow of
Voldemort looming, she didn't suffer the misery and uncertainty of having nothing like Luke did.

Heri wanted so much to help Luke, but she didn't even know how to get him to stay in
Bramblewood Hall outside of using it as the occasional safehouse. And how would she have done so
anyway? She couldn't force him, never mind that they were an ocean apart right now. He was a
prideful boy, with good reason of course, but she wished that pride would bend enough to let her
take care of him as much as she could. A ring to hide him from monsters and a weekly care-packet
from Fisken was nowhere near having a roof over his head.

Speaking of rings to keep monsters away, Luke was around the age for the said ring to become
ineffective for him. Had he turned twelve yet? Heri couldn't remember his exact birth-date at the
moment, but she did remember that he was still nine when she first met him, and she was already fifteen at that time, so she should still have a few months left before his twelfth. She'd have to make something to better conceal him soon.

Unfolding the tatty letter, Heri saw that it was of similar make as Luke's usual letters. The dear boy had sent her belated birthday wishes because Fisken had mentioned to him that she recently turned seventeen and he had been put out because he hadn't known until then. All in all, it was a simple but nice note. He had even sent along a talon he had gotten off an avian monster. 'For your spoils necklace', he said, referring to the chain she had made of the feathers, fangs, claws, and the like of the monsters she had slain. It was sweet of him, and she resolved to put it as a centrepiece in place of the Orthus fangs that were current talking precedence.

A vibration at her hip jolted Heri from her thoughts. Deftly, she fished out her pocket-watch and saw that the waxing gibbous moon was in Sagittarius, the Sun was in Leo, Venus was in the XII House, and the date was Thursday, the fourteenth of August — but more importantly, it was twenty to ten, high time she got moving.

Sigil formulation churning in the back of her mind, Heri got up and went to round up her friends for her first appointment of the day.

The next three weeks before the autumn school term came to session saw another Death Eater attack (this time near the Queen's residence, but dealt with soon enough that the bastards didn't get anywhere near Her Majesty), ominous talk from the Muggles of monitoring their borders and airlines more closely, and a rise in owl-delivery because of how reluctant people were becoming of going out for so much as groceries. Staunch homebodies were a minority, but their lack was still felt even with the ones who overcompensated with bravado filling the spaces as much as they could, doing their best to pretend nothing was wrong. Both extremes were derided by the rest who kept a stiff upper lip, intent on keeping on as best as they could.

It was fascinating to observe the things that changed during times of war and the things that managed to stay the same despite everything. No doubt it was because this was her first memory of civil unrest, but Heri couldn't help but admire how the common people — the people who were just innocent bystanders that is — did their dogged best to maintain the day-to-day status quo. Come Hell or high water or even a Dark Lord once again on the prowl, The Leaky Cauldron was open from six to midnight, and Gringotts did not allow hawkers to peddle their questionable goods on the bank's front steps. It was as if the higher the body-count piled up and the more militaristic the system became in response, the stronger the people clung to what facets of normalcy they could.

Their silent refusal to let the Voldemort upheave them as he had before filled Heri with an absurd amount of pride, maybe even patriotism. The people of Britain were scared and confused, but they weren't cowed just yet.

Upon that particular day — that particular day being the last day of the summer holidays, the day before Heri was off for school again — Heri was squeezing in one last afternoon in the Alleys. Luck would have it that Mad-Eye had been sent off on a mission the night before, leaving her with the irresistible opportunity to go out without an armoured guard barricading her. Some wheedling on her part along with the promise to wear her emergency portkey and her strongest notice-me-not bauble had Sirius and Remus reluctantly agreeing to let Viktor and her go see the play she had been hearing about from Sally-Anne.

The play that The Laurestine — the premier theatre hall of London's Alleys — was currently running was *A Hypothetical Treachery*, a musical set in the 17th-century about the orphaned
Muggle-born niece of a clergyman discovering she was magical during a time of witch-hunts and coming into her own despite her abusive family and strictly Catholic upbringing. It was touching, inspirational, even hilarious at some parts, and it promoted themes that were blatantly against everything the Death Eaters were about.

The musical set that had Heri tearing up a bit was the one that took place when Louisa — the protagonist — met and somehow made friends with a surly pure-blood girl whose family held a grudge against the church Louisa's uncle ministered at.

"I'm just like you! You're just like me!/ There's somewhere else we'd rather be./ Somewhere that's ours, somewhere that dreams come true./ Yes, I am a girl like you!/ You'd never think that it was so,/ but now I've met you and I know./ It's plain as day, sure as the sky is blue,/ that I am a girl like you!"

Later, when exiting the theatre hall on Viktor's arm, Ollie swinging off her free hand, Heri didn't miss that many others who had been in the audience came out with resolute, determined looks on their faces. It was humbling to witness yet another show of opposition against the Dark forces that had absolutely nothing to do with politics or warfare.

She couldn't help but smile fondly as a little boy bounced by with his parents, singing one of the more light-hearted songs.

"When I grow uuup . . . !/ I will be tall enough to reach the bran-ches/ that you need to reach to climb/ the trees you get to climb when you're grown uuup!"

"And when I grow uu~up!" Ollie warbled the next part to herself, doing a happy twirl as they went along. "I will be smart eh-nough to an-swer all/ the ques-tions that you ne~ed to know/ the an-swers to be-fore you're grown uuup!"

It was honestly the cutest thing; Heri had never seen Ollie so enthusiastic before. Under better times and circumstances, Heri would have looked into getting the little Bogle an apprentice position in a theatre troupe — she had been starry-eyed and awed as soon as the curtains had lifted.

"I wish I could do that . . ."

Heri looked up to see Viktor looking wistfully around at the upbeat groups of people singing and chattering happily as they dispersed into the bustling late afternoon crowd.

"Well, not everyone can sing," Heri teased, bumping her friend with her hip, absentmindedly leading them toward a park at the end of the road that she knew of. "Wouldn't being amazing at Quidditch and having a voice like an angel be a bit much? Don't be get greedy now."

Viktor replied with a good-natured huff and a poke to her cheek.

"I do not vunt to hear that from you, Miss Jack-of-All-Trades. But you know that is not vot I mean."

Heri waited quietly as Viktor collected his thoughts, brushing a stray strand of her fringe from her eyes.

"These people . . ." Viktor eventually began. "They suffer as the home country of a Dark Lord who refuses to die, the centre of his reign of terror . . . for such a thing as a play to strengthen morale . . . I wish I could inspire such optimism amongst my own people."

Heri offered no words, instead leaning against his shoulder in support. Honestly, what could she have said?
Heri was in the dubiously privileged position of being well informed of the social and political goings-on of the Continent. Through word-of-mouth from Sirius and Remus of their forays, and her correspondence with Viktor all these years, Heri had a pretty good idea of the state of Europe. It wasn't a pretty picture. Suffice to say they were dealing with their own insurgence Dark Wizards: opportunistic criminals emboldened by Voldemort's dramatic return, hoping to milk his 'cause' for their own petty gains. It wasn't to the same degree that Britain was staggering under — Voldemort had yet to fully touch down on international soil again — but such a surge in criminal activity hadn't been known in Eurasia since Grindelwald's reign. Their civilian folk were no longer equipped to endure such uncertain times after the fifty-plus years of relative peace they'd enjoyed.

For all that Heri desperately hoped to gain assistance from the European governments, she understood that they had their own battles to contend with already. She had actually heard from Remus that a potential sympathiser they had met with had claimed that it was Britain that should have been sending out aid and not the other way around.

"Britons and their overpowered sorcerers!" the gentleman was said to have complained. "One of your blasted Dark Lords is worth at least three from anywhere else!"

It was a disheartening opinion, to say the least. Still, Heri couldn't hold it against them when their populace was in a greater amount of turmoil because the complacency they had fallen into.

"I haff been . . . thinking of taking a break from Quidditch," Viktor remarked idly after a bit, making Heri start and look up. "The ministry is mustering the Aurors — perhaps I vill join them."

"What are you saying?" Heri gaped, eyes like a startled deer. "You love Quidditch! And-and — you hate the law-enforcement system in your country! Why would you even consider . . . ?"

Viktor granted her a mild but meaningful look.

"Can you not guess?"

Heri's mouth shut with a click.

"Don't you dare make this about me," she hissed frantically, hands coming up and grasping at his forearm, staggering them to a stop.

A look of vexation and urgency crawled onto Heri's face.

On top of the expected ado she had to contend with since her 'grand' revelation on her birthday, Heri's friends had somehow grown even more solicitous towards her. Make no mistake, she had braced herself for the spike in hero-worship that inevitably came again, but the kid gloves and tender touches were baffling. In direct contrast to how strangers and many of the Order members now treated her like she was the hand of God, her friends acted like she was a sneeze away from vacating her body and leaving the mortal plane. Hermione of all people descended to that level as well.

Hermione Granger had actually used the knittings skills that she had ever reserved for making strict necessities to create a deceptively cute little drawstring wrist-bag. It was black and white and shaped like a curled-up hedgehog. It was enchanted with an Undetectable Expansion Charm for Heri to carry her medication, her spare inhaler, et cetera, and the emergency medical supplies that the other girl had provided along with the bag. And when Heri said 'emergency medical supplies' she didn't mean a little first-aid kit — no, Hermione had provided a veritable ambulance of bandages, balms, and potions. Heri hadn't even wanted to ask how Hermione had paid for what had to be a costly load, not after seeing the ominous glint in the studious girl's eyes as she pointed out one particular numbing potion that doubled as a full-body paralysing agent if thrown in someone's face.
Viktor had been amongst the few that hadn't tried to coddle her — though, admittedly, he had little chance to do so while he had been countries away. But he had been so mellow since he had arrived! To see such solicitousness rearing it's ugly head now, at the detriment of himself as well . . . it was troublesome, to say the least.

"Don't you dare," Heri continued, her words growing rushed, "throw yourself into a system you— despise-out-of-some-misguidedsenseofheroicsto—!

"The Bulgarian minister is only an official declaration away from sending Britain aid," Viktor said, cutting her off. "Did you know that?"

This stopped Heri short. When she did not respond immediately, Viktor pressed on.

"My father told me about it himself. Oblansk had been in favour of extending a hand to Britain when it became clear that You-Know-Who rose again — it was only his cabinet that was holding him back. Now that his hooks are sinking into the Continent once more — his disgusting underlings scrabbling in like plague rats — Oblansk has gained unanimous support from the high council. He's due to announce his intentions any day now."

Hope and dread intermingled in Heri's belly. After over two years of stark ostracism from the other nations, would they really be getting support? Oh, but . . . Viktor . . .

She could hardly approve of such a thing!

"I am the last person who should be arguing age — but, Viktor," she implored, sliding her grasp down to his hand and clenching it tightly when he opened his mouth to contradict her, "you're only a few years out of formal schooling, not even old enough for — for your first Journeyman examination if you had followed that route!"

As she spoke, Heri pulled them out from the flow of traffic and into a little nook between two shops, just apart enough that they didn't disturb passersby.

"I don't know how they do things in Bulgaria, but if we weren't under war-time regulations here, our Aurors wouldn't be — they wouldn't be out in the field until they had at least three years of training under their belts. You don't have that training, Viktor! The way they're churning out Aurors right now . . . you wouldn't get even half of that training before you'd be expected to fight! And that's only if you lived here! I don't doubt that — oh, the numbers must be even worse for the Bulgarian Aurors!"

"Am I to just stand by and do nothing?" He demanded, a mulish look on his face.

"Think of your family—"

"It is because of my family that I first considered this! Long has the Krum family fought against Dark Lords in their rampages! Countless of my ancestors gave their lives in battle! I would not dishonour them by hiding away!

"What dishonour is there in choosing another option besides being on the front-line?!" Heri demanded. "I'm not saying roll over and die here, you know? But you don't have to go out in a blaze of spellfire to make a difference!"

"What other way is there against enemies who use nothing but scare tactics and terrorism?! It's not the bureaucrats and public speakers that are culling the disgusting blight but the soldiers!"

"'Culling' indeed! And for every Death Eater taken down in open combat, half a troop of Aurors
"And Hit Wizards lose their lives! If not more!"

"So you think we are all better off cowvering in our homes then!?"

"Bite your tongue! You know very well I don't think that at all! Ooh, you —! You're missing my entire point here! The Auror casualties are absolutely nothing to scoff at, and those are our elite forces — elite only because of their years of training! And the new recruits aren't getting those years now, putting them in an even higher risk! If you were to join the Aurors now, you might as well — you might as well be feeding yourself to a dragon!

"You're your parents' only son, Viktor! They would be devastated if something was to happen to you!"

"And would I not be devastated if something were to happen to you?" he said, taking both her hands in his and squeezing.

"Viktor . . ." Heri didn't know how to put her fears and feelings of impotence into words. "Viktor, I couldn't live with myself if you were hurt or-or killed in an attempt to keep me safe."

His face twisted into a fearsome glower, frustration written on every line.

"And yet you don't mind training and encouraging those children at your school how to go up against Death Eaters themselves?" he growled, his grip becoming almost painful.

Hera rear back as if struck.

"That you would say such a thing . . ."

"Wait—" There was instantaneous contrition. "Hera—"

"No, I see how it is!" Hera gritted out, ripping her hands back. "This is how you really think!"

"Hera, please—"

"Bullying children into running head-first to their deaths — telling them they should be the ones going out to fight Dark wizards —"

"I didn't say that at all!" Viktor protested, taking an aborted step toward her.

"'Encouraging' the children at Hogwarts to 'go up against Death Eaters themselves'," Hera echoed spitefully. "What a disgusting monster I am! Even he doesn't induct school children for his wretched army! Never mind the Dark Lord, it's me who ought to be put down!"

"Hera, please!" Viktor pleaded, latching onto her again. "Don't say things like that! I didn't mean it like that at all! I just . . . I just want to . . ."

She allowed him his hold on her, but her countenance did not soften in the least. She regarded him with flint-harsh eyes.

"I don't know what you want from me, Viktor Krum. Clearly, I'm some monstrous beast by your own reckoning if you think I'm filling children's heads with suicidal thoughts. Why would you possibly want to protect me or whatever it is you think you'd be doing?"

"I just meant that you train them and expect them to fight!" he protested. "Auror training or not, we both know I'm more likely to hold my ground than a handful of underaged children!"
"I train them because they are the most likely to be targeted! Because of their potential and because how they can be used as leverage! And everything I teach them is based on the premise of them surviving long enough to escape!"

"And you don't think some of them will get it in their heads to stick around and fight?!"

"Of course some of those fool-hardy idiots will! But they would do so even without any training! At least now they'll have a glimmer of a chance instead of being sitting ducks!"

"Then why should I not contribute my own efforts?!"

"BECAUSE YOU STILL HAVE THE CHOICE! WE DON'T!"

The volume of Heri's bellow reached the ears of the surrounding street, startling people and making them turn. Her notice-me-not charm was effectively nullified by the forceful draw of attention. People murmured and craned their necks to see what the fuss was about. It was only the discreet way Viktor and she were dressed that prevented either of them from being recognised.

Feeling the eyes on them, Heri flicked her tongue over her now-defunct lip-cuff in irritation and hustled them away through the back-alley, Ollie (who had been fidgeting at the back of the witch's skirts the entire confrontation) hoisted onto her hip for faster travel.

They travelled in heavy silence until they emerged onto Horizont Alley, not too far from where it would intersect and empty out into Diagon. A look at Ollie's miserable face had Heri quietly suggesting they stop at Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour for a pick-me-up.

Viktor agreed with a subdued nod.

Eventually seated and with toothsome sundaes in front of them, they dug into their ice cream without any words. It was only after he had finished half of his already that Viktor spoke again.

"It is because you don't have a choice that I must help."

Heri savoured the taste of raspberry ripple on her tongue for a moment before she replied.

"Don't think that I'm ungrateful," she said quietly, teasing a peak of whipped cream with her spoon. "We are so very isolated here, from our Muggles and from other nations. France is our closest ally and we still just have the barest amount of trade with them, never mind anything else. Don't think that I'm saying we don't need your help, but . . ."

"It's selfish of me," Heri admitted, bringing another spoonful to her mouth. "Logically, you're a prime ally to have on multiple fronts. Your father is well-placed in your government and is respected and favoured by your people for his effectiveness; your family has a rich history that involves taking up arms against the Dark Arts and must certainly have priceless knowledge of combat magic; you yourself are an admired figurehead with a following of your own; and if that was not enough, you are a skilled duellist who is no slouch at sorcery and would be an invaluable comrade to battle beside."

"Then why . . .?"

She huffed and looked at him reproachfully.

"You act as if you can't already guess. Do I really come across as so cold-hearted? Do you think you're the only one who wants to keep your friends safe?"
Viktor laughed self-depreciatingly.

"Somehow . . . I think our motivation differs in a significant vey. If you vould just let me do this for you . . ."

Heri gave no reply to that, she merely watched him with solemn eyes.

Their return trip was done mostly in silence.

Instead of returning to Grimmauld Place, they made their way to a cosy inn in Vertic. Viktor's portkey would be leaving early in the morning from the office of the Department of Magical Transportation, the usual place for international portkeys, so it was easier for him to stay in the area for the night and then take the Knight Bus to Whitehall in the morning.

The sun was almost completely sunken behind the low-rising buildings when they finally made it the Occam Inn. Through the windows, they could see the chandeliers being lit and the torches lighting up. The last of the families were disappearing from the street, and soon not even the couples and last-minute shoppers would be about, not with the new curfew in place.

Heri walked her friend to the front door and gave him a tight hug in farewell.

"If I had my way," she told him very seriously, "you'd catch the first portkey home and wouldn't set another foot on British soil again until restorations were well underway. No," she silenced him firmly before he could argue, "I know it's not my place to tell you what to do, but you must understand that you getting involved will never be what I want.

"But that's the crux of it — this shouldn't be about me. No one should be going out and fighting because they want to please me, nor should they decide to do otherwise for the same token. If you choose to follow through with this decision, do not do it for me, Viktor Krum — do it for you. Do it because that's who you are, and those are your convictions, and to do otherwise would be to turn away from your principles. Do it because you choose to."

She heaved a little rueful sigh.

"Don't throw away your life because you fancy a silly little girl who may or may not want you the same way," — here Viktor flushed and sputtered as Heri gave him a fond, knowing look — "but if it's your 'right thing to do' . . . I won't try to stop you."

Viktor opened and closed his mouth several times without saying anything. He eventually gave up and instead took her hands in his again and pressed them to his lips. He then drew her into another hug, lifting her right off her feet — one arm around her middle, the other supporting her bum — and buried his face in her neck.

"Goodbye, Viktor," Heri said when she was set back down again. "Please . . . please stay safe."

Not two months into the new school year, the newspapers came screaming that Voldemort had finally properly invaded the Continent. Headlines and articles went mad with tales of mass devastation, massacres, and countless previously solitary Dark Wizards flocking to the Dark Lord's banner. France was in a state of panic; Belgium was locking down their entry ports; Luxembourg had cut itself off entirely from the rest of Europe; Denmark, Germany, and Austria were in a state of martial law; and Norway and Finland were arresting people right off the streets who had even the feeblest link to the Death Eaters.

Accompanying the new wave of terror, a flood of owls came pouring in, demanding access to
"You have no right to keep the one prophesied to defeat him from us!" declared numerous harried Ministers of Magic. "You cannot just keep the gods' favour to yourselves!"

But for good or for ill, Britain had no inclination of sending the young Magistrate out on some twisted tour of Europe for whatever good anyone thought that would bring.

"As we are, we have no resources available to send abroad to lend aid to our neighbours," Minister Scrimgeour announced at a press conference in response, his jaw tight and his countenance grim. "It is regretful, but the fact of the matter is that we are currently shouldering a greater amount of threat and damage than what our foreign brothers have are now coming to know. We must look to our own interests for the time being. If we can't help ourselves, we certainly can't help others."

Chapter End Notes

AN1: I implied during the Dept. Mysteries scene that wizards — or at least British wizards — have words and phrases that are exclusively used by wizards. This chapter will have a few. I hate using the same adjectives repeatedly and sometimes there are just no specific words I can think of off the top of my head for what I'm trying to say. Some of them are technically real words, but you will be hard pressed to find them in a modern dictionary.

Wizard’s English you might have come across in this chapter and the upcoming chapters:

-Ambidexter: (Am-buh-DECK-ster) noun.
A person who takes fees or bribes from both sides. ex. 'Minister Fudge talked big about outlawing the Dark Arts, but that greedy ambidexter was still lining his pocket with Malfoy money despite his Light-sided financial backers.'

-Anthropophoginian: (AN-throh-PAH-fah-GIN-ee-an) noun.
One who consumes human flesh. ex. 'Despite how well they now get along with wizards, merfolk have always been voracious anthropophoginians.'

-Cantripitous: (Can-TRIP-it-us) adj.
Unimpressive, pathetic, petty and/or crude, especially when referring to something magical. ex. 'At first I was excited to see there was a stage magician performing in the park, but all he could do was cantripitous card tricks.'

-Dwimmer-crafty: (DWIM-mer-CRAF-ty) adj.
Extremely proficient in magic, particularly illusions. ex. 'That dwimmer-crafty swot got ten O.W.L.s, two of them in classes he didn't even take!'

-Emotophage: (Eh-MOH-toh-FAGE) noun.
One who consumes emotions. ex. 'The Succubus, dementor, and Boggart are three emotophages our D.A.D.A. professor is teaching us about.'
-Semidieous: (Seh-MEE-day-us) adj.

Partially divine. ex. 'A semidieous daughter of Athena died in a library.'

-Thaumaturgy: (THAW-mah-TUR-gy) noun.

Defin. 1. The science and logistics of performing magic. ex. 'I couldn't do the transfiguration until I understood the thaumaturgic formula for it.'

Defin. 2. Magic involving powers of natural substances or those of the caster; synonymous with Low Magic. ex. 'I have no skill with invocation and the like, but I do well enough with thaumaturgy.'

AN2: I'm very musical this chapter, aren't I? Oh, well! *shrug* I am of the thorough belief that a healthy existence requires some measure of music, and I have headcanon that Sirius smuggled muggle records home when he could and was into trippy rock of the seventies. As for A Hypothetical Treachery, all songs mention in my made-up musical are real and can be found on YouTube. (Duh.) Just google the lyrics or something.
AN1: I can already hear your thoughts now: "Noose, WTF? It's been FOUR MONTHS!"

I know, I know — This was in part because I've been running around all over IRL for work, moving again, and having no internet hooked up yet at home — and also because my brain made incorrect connections between words and their meanings — I saw like a month and a half back that the last time that I updated was the 8th month, erroneously thought that meant that I updated in OCTober, and then thought to myself, "Oh, that's alright then! It hasn't been that long!"

No, Thoughtless Noose. No. Even a wait of a month is pretty darn long for a story that's supposed to be regularly updated. You're only redeeming trait in this is that you make up for the wait with length and progression of plot.

But anywaaaaaayyyyy, this is the final chapter of this arc! Hang on to your fackin' seats, ya'll, I'll be working in a major climax here! (Oh, gods, now I'm making myself nervous . . . I hope it'll be interesting and satisfying.) And it's 63 Word document pages (in 12 font) long, so I think that's a good enough apology.

AN2: Mad kudos to Chewy Nemesis for being the beautiful muse that inspired a significant part of the climax of this chapter, and thus influencing a major part of this story, since the build up had to be just right to make the climax work. It's been a long time since we had that talk, my beautiful muse, (mainly because I'm a hella slow writer) but it's finally here! If you're still reading, I hope you enjoy it!

AN3: IN THIS CHAPTER THERE WILL BE IMPLICATIONS OF RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION AND CONVERSATION THAT HINTS AT THE BELITTLEMENT OF SPECIFIC MONOTHEISTIC BELIEF-SYSTEMS. This is in no way a reflection of my own thoughts and beliefs, and is in no way meant as an attack against readers who follow such faiths. I believe in judging people by their own merits no matter what belief-system they follow, and I don't believe in turning up my nose at a religion because of how some horrible people act in the name of it. To quote a friend, "I'm cool with Jesus — it's His die-hard groupies I can't stand."

Also, important note at the end, so please read that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Herakles Potter," a pernicious voice hissed in her ear. "The Girl Who Lived . . . come to die."

Amidst crumbling ruins and charred earth stood Heri Potter.

A chunk of scalp was missing from one side of her head, the absence obscene amongst the hellish rat's-nest that was her remaining hair. It gushed into her eyes and down her neck, plastering down her tatty shirt like a second skin. Her right arm was but a stump tied off with a filthy bandage, having
been severed off at the elbow. Greyback had gotten to her, his teeth had bitten into her arm and ripped off what it could; already she could feel the werewolf's curse scorching through her veins, singing with the slumbering basilisk's venom still laced through her blood.

But she did not waver. She felt no pain. At that moment nothing and nobody mattered but Voldemort. It was just the two of them.

"I might," she replied, the sound hallow and somehow separate from herself. "But you'll still lose this day."

And all at once there was an audience. Giants roared as the Death Eaters rose together, and there were many cries, gasps, even laughter. In the background, dementors swirled, swooping through the air like carrion-fowl.

Voldemort stood toweringly, a looming wraith in his own right. His hellish eyes narrowed menacingly as Heri moved toward him. Nothing but a pillar of green fire eating away at what used to be a wall stood between them.

Then a voice yelled, "HERI! NO!"

She turned mechanically. Hagrid was bound and trussed, tied to a tree nearby. His massive body shook the branches overhead as he struggled, desperate.

"NO! NO! HERI, WHAT'RE YEH —?!

"QUIET!" a Death eater shouted, and with a flick of his wand Hagrid was silenced.

A slavering mutt of a woman ('Bellatrix Lestrange' was whispered in the back of her mind) had leapt to her feet and was looking eagerly from Voldemort to Heri, her breasts heaving. The only other things that moved were the flames and the snake, coiling and uncoiling in the glittering cage behind Voldemort's head.

Heri could feel her primary wand against her thigh, but she made no attempt to draw it. The snake . . . the snake was significant somehow . . . it needed to be destroyed . . . but she knew that it was too well protected, knew that if she managed to point the wand at . . . Nagini? . . . fifty curses would cut her down first. Even with her tenacula she would be outnumbered.

And still Voldemort and Heri looked at each other.

Voldemort tilted his head a little to the side, considering the girl standing before him, and a singularly mirthless smile curled the lipless mouth.

"So confident still, sweet girl!" Voldemort mocked. "No pleads for mercy? Not even for your 'dear friend' here? I see you are more ruthless than I was led to believe!"

Heri said nothing, remembering fully well that she had shown Voldemort exactly how ruthless she could be when she had physically torn into his pitiful homunculus form over and over again and had not stopped until he was forced to abandon it. She could still taste the putrid sting of that festering blood on her tongue.

"Or perhaps not," Voldemort continued, an irrepressible flash of loathing alighting on his face. No doubt he was remembering the same incident. He then bared his teeth in a foul travesty of a grin. "Why not join me, child? I know how quick to kill you can be when given the right incentive. We could achieve much together. You don't have to die alongside this rabble."
'This rabble' he said, as if all present were not the best Britain had to offer. As if the slain had not given him an equal amount of Hell as they were shown before they were cut down.

"I would rather die."

"But I am feeling generous today!" was his insidious response. "Swear yourselves into my service and I will spare your life."

Several Death Eaters lurking behind him visibly gaped, strangled gasps escaping them. No doubt they had witnessed enough of his declarations to utterly destroy her that a claim otherwise was unthinkable.

Heri watched him steadily.

"Do you promise?" she asked after a loaded moment, noting as he began to smirk. "Do you promise that you will not kill me?"

Voldemort narrowed his eyes with satisfaction. His minions hooted and jeered at her apparent grovelling.

"Lord Voldemort honours his words and rewards fealty," he said grandly. "Swear yourself to me and you will live."

Heri did not hesitate even a beat.

"I refuse."

Anger twisted his already monstrous visage. Then a sharp look of false cheer made its way onto Voldemort face, reminiscent of the foul beast of a woman the Ministry had sent in her fifth year to be a professor.

"I wonder if you would say the same after I have my followers collectively hold you under the Cruciatus well beyond the point of retaining sanity," Voldemort pondered conversationally. "I believe the Longbottom couple would have much to tell about it if they had the chance to.

"Ah, but that was merely four of my followers! There are quite a few more present at the time being. I dare say it would be doubtful that anyone could survive such a thing . . . .

"Join me or die."

Heri's flat, dead eyes said more than enough.

"I refuse."

"This is my last warning, girl —"

"I refuse," Heri cut him off, intent dripping from every word. "As my father and mother died for me, I will die for them."

A tingle of magic surged through the clearing, raising the fine hairs of all who were present, sending unsettled murmurs through the crowd.

Heri's spread what remained of her arms open in invitation, the stump of her severed limb leaking blood through the bandage. Her placid eyes bore steadily into Voldemort's.

"Kill me if you dare," she breathed, her skin beginning to glow.
Voldemort's mouth twisted into a snarl, his reptilian nostrils flaring.

"WHAT IS THIS?!" he roared, brandishing his wand. "What sorcery do you dare attempt when my men have your people by their throats and no escape offered to you?!"

"My life for theirs," Heri murmured to herself, her head tipping back and her eyelids sliding shut. Even with her eyes closed, the light pouring off of her bled her vision orange instead of black.

An unnatural wind swept through, tugging at her tattered clothes.

"ANSWER ME!"

How odd — he was beginning to sound truly panicked. But Heri only just registered the fact, she was too overcome by the feeling of fullness over-taking her.

"What are you doing, girl?!"

Bigger and bigger now — and higher and fuller —! It was so much! Too much! Too much to contain —!

"HERI!"

— And everything was no more.

___

Heri jolted awake violently, gasping for breath. In the vehemence of her awakening, she flung off something on top of her and sent it flying.

SCREE-UANG!

"UWAAAH! What the —?!!"

"EEEEEEK!"

The resulting crash and clamour woke the entire dorm, shouts sounding and screeches of alarm going around. Through the fluttering gap of her bed-curtains, Heri could see girls jumping out of bed, tripping over each other, and scrambling for the lights. She swung her legs over to the ground as well, ripping open her curtains and clutching her primary wand in her hand.

"What's happening?" Heri demanded in her best prefect voice, heart thumping loudly in her ears, head still sleep-muddled, seeing double. A nightmare — it had just been a nightmare . . . .

By the door, Susan Bones had her wand pointed at a snarling and hissing heap of cloth, parchment, and school supplies, looking fierce despite her duckling pyjamas and messy sleeping braids. Hannah stood to her left, holding a lamp like a club, hair like a haystack.

Hannah's head whipped around, eyes wide.

"Heri?" she gaped, utterly baffled. This was forgiveable since it was now well-known that Heri slept like the dead and only woke up if similarly resurrected.

"What's happening?" Heri repeated more firmly, getting to her feet and padding forward. Her vision realigned and she only swayed a touch.

"Something attacked me!" wailed Leanne Runcorn, standing on her bed and clutching at one of the posts as if it was a life-line.
A few of the other girls including Sally-Anne were huddled around Leanne's bed, looking perturbed but still attempting some semblance of protecting her.

Attacked? In the Hufflepuff dorms? What in the world . . . ? Heri's brow furrowed. The whatever-it-was from earlier? A lost pet perhaps?

"That's it over there?" Heri asked, drawing up her wand as well.

"Careful," Susan cautioned, in full DA captain mode, sparks flickering at her wandtip.

Heri hummed her acknowledgement, eyeing the thrashing heap. Seemed rather violent for a stray animal . . . .

"Right," she began. "Here's what we're going to do: Susan and Hannah are going to back up, the rest of you are going to stay where you are, and on the count of three I'm going to Summon that tablecloth so we can see what's under there. I will attempt to Stun it, and on the off chance that it's a dangerous creature Susan — being the one closest to the door — will run for Professor Sprout. Am I understood?"

There were mutters of assent.

"Good. One . . . Two . . . Accio!"

The tablecloth shot up and zipped over Heri's shoulder, flinging the debris into the air as well. She immediately followed with a Stunner, but whatever it was was faster, and bee-lined for underneath the nearest bed.

"AAAH!" screeched the owner of said bed, Alice Tolipan, usually the quietest girl amongst them. She yanked her feet up from the floor and rolled to the middle of the mattress.

Without further prompting Susan dove for the door, her footfall thudding audibly down the hall.

"Alice, don't move!" Heri commanded. "That goes for everyone else as well!"

Heri shot pointed looks at Hannah and Sally-Anne who had both tensed to rush forward.

"Not an inch! If it comes out again we'll need some distance to get a decent shot at it."

Heri then hitched up her nightgown to her knees and tucked the excess fabric tightly around her thighs. Stumbling-danger taken care of, she unceremoniously dropped to sit on her heels and then shifted so that her torso was half laid on its side. Now crouched like a predator, she peered under the bed.

Two luminous eyes peered back.

"Lumos," she incanted with a swish of her wand, shining the light into the creature's face.

It hissed and reared back, blinking rabidly. It was —

"Just a cat!" Heri exclaimed, exasperation in her tone.

A sigh of relief went around the room.

"Hang on . . . " she murmured, looking a bit closer. "I think it's . . . a kneazle?"

Yowling at her from the strip of wall just underneath the head of the bed was a distinctly feline
creature with massive, pointed ears. It's coat was reminiscent of a tiger or perhaps a cheetah: ginger fur spotted and striped with black. It's tail was rather short, but it had the tell-tale lion-like tuft of black bristles at the tip.

Horrifically, where its right eye was supposed to be was only a gory mess.

"Oh, my gods, it's hurt!" Heri exclaimed, scooching back with alarm.

Susan chose that moment to reappear with Professor Sprout on her tail, flinging the door open with a BANG and startling those within — including the maimed kneazle.

As the other girls jumped and shrieked, the animal lunged for Heri, digging its claws into the bodice of her nightgown. Heri couldn't help but squeal when those same claws sank into her skin.

There was then a messy scrabble with nearly everyone present that involved quite a bit of scratching, animal growling, and the shredding of garments. It eventually ended with Professor Sprout having two claws embedded in her forearm; Susan, Hannah, and Alice roughed up like a scratching-post; and awful rips in all their clothes.

The kneazle somehow found its way back onto Heri, but this time it was huddled around her neck and shivering like a frightened rabbit. Luckily, it wasn't much bigger than the average house-cat, so it didn't have to suffocate her to stay on.

"Has it calmed down then, Miss Potter?" asked Professor Sprout, wand pointed at her arm to stem the bleeding.

"I-I um, I think so, Professor," Heri replied, hands hovering cautiously over the quivering form wrapped around the base of her head. She could feel its humid breath on her shoulder.

"Where the Hell did it even come from?" Sally-Anne grouched with uncharacteristic profanity, scowling at a very obvious rent across her pyjamas sleeve.

Professor Sprout pinned her with an admonishing look.

"Does anyone recognise the creature?" the professor inquired, slowly moving forward as to not startle the kneazle again.

A unanimous 'no' went around along with disgruntled glowers at the thing.

The professor then tried to gently remove the feline from Heri's person — the key word here being 'gently' — but it was having none of that. Heri tensed as pin-pricks alighted along the right side of her neck, a warm wetness trickling down her jugular.

The damn thing was one slash away from tearing into Heri's oesophagus.

"Ohhhh-kay . . ." she breathed, carefully but deliberately pushing away the professor's hands. "It doesn't seem very willing to be removed at the moment, professor. Perhaps we should give it another minute or so?"

Her suggested was delivered in a mild, unconcerned tone, as if their wasn't an agitated creature literally at her throat.

Professor Sprout eyed the blood seeping into the fabric of Heri's neckline with deer-eyed alarm, her hands frozen where they were still held in the air.
As Heri opened her mouth to utter more placating words, the kneazle keened plaintively, and under the sound there was —

*Pray, my lady, send these crude mortals away! 'Tis a wonder this vessel did not perish sooner under these reprehensible conditions!*

The words hitched in her throat, her breath catching as well.

*Namtar.*

Holy Hera, she was holding a dead and possessed animal — this was some Abrahamic demon bullocks!

"*Agh* —"

"Are you alright, Miss Potter?" Professor Sprout asked earnestly, hand coming forward again.

"Quite fine, Professor!" Heri squeaked quickly, finally pressing a quelling hand against the possessed feline. "I just— I just realised that I know this kneazle! Yes, erm, it . . ." — how does one explain that the creature in one's arms was actually deceased and being controlled by the manifestation of Death? — "I-It's a stray I came across a while ago. I took care of it for a bit before it decided to wandered off. I-I guess it wanted to see me again."

There — that wasn't a lie, but it wasn't telling either.

Professor Sprout donned an incredulous look.

"I thought you said you didn't recognise it?"

"I'm sorry, Professor, I didn't get a proper look at him before he was on me," Heri apologised, ducking her head. "But I know that yowling anywhere, and I recognise his stumpy tail now."

"'Stumpy!' Namtar actually sounded offended over the pronouncement. *It's a perfectly respectable length, m'lady!*

*Hush you,* Heri commanded in her mind.

*I would thank you not to call down such harsh defamation!* He continued without pause. *In fact, I might even ask you to retract your statement—*

— *Namtar* —

— 'tis the length of my own 'length' you see—

**ENOUGH.**

"— you're sure . . ."

"Yes, ma'am," Heri said, catching just the tail-end of the professor's words. "I'm sorry for the trouble."

"I can hardly blame you for a stray animal deciding to make its own way into the castle and mucking around," Professor Sprout said, waving off her apology, "even if it was aiming for you."

"Thank you, ma'am. Would you like me to get rid of it?"
"My laaaady!

*Shut. The. *Fuck.* Up.*

"If you have no plans on keeping it, then yes. Take it to one of the house-elves and they'll get rid it in that case," the professor said, stepping forward and healing the small punctures when it was clear that the kneazle was no longer worked up. "But if you decide you want to keep it, then it needs to be kept in check so that something like this doesn't happen again."

"Yes, ma'am! This won't happen again!" Heri said seriously. She eyed Namtar pointedly. "Isn't that *right...* Pom-pom?"

The confounded look on the feline's face at his cutesy new moniker was one that lasted through the rest of the girls either going back to bed or deciding to get an early start to their usual morning routines and Heri vacating the dorms on the premise of getting his eye looked at by Madam Pomfrey.

"What in all hells are you doing here again?" Heri hissed at the deity as she trekked up a set of stairs. "In a corporeal form at that!"

'Pom-pom'? he asked instead.

Heri rolled her eyes, shifting the kneazle in her arms.

"I had to think of something to call you. I had all of a spilt second — gimme a break!"

*But... but, my lady, wherefore did ye conceive 'Pom-pom' of all things in creation?*

"You're a psychopomp, aren't you? 'Pomp', 'pom' — it's close enough. You're lucky I didn't call you something like Mr. Fluffybottom — the neighbour lady who used to mind me when I was younger named *all* her cats stuff like that."

*Could ye have not simply called me by my true name?* he mewed plaintively.

Heri scoffed.

"And let everyone in the room know a manifestation of Death was present? I don't think so. They're not Muggles, Pom-pom, and all the names of Death are well-known even if only because you're so feared."

Namtar closed his remaining eye and purred, no doubt pleased at the reminder that mortals shuddered at the thought of him.

"But never mind that!" Heri said, reaching the top of the landing and turning left down the corridor. "Why are you here? And in a meat suit?"

Namtar dithered.

*Not enow be it that this servant merely wisheth to gaze upon the magnificent visage of his beloved lady once more? My heart hath yearned for you...* 

Heri was not impressed.

"In sooth?" she deadpanned, affecting his way of speech.

He managed a kitty grin.
Verily!

Heri took the tip of one of his ears between her thumb and forefinger and pinched very deliberately, not letting up when Namtar whined painfully.

"Even if I did accept that, it doesn't explain why you're inhabiting a kneazle."

I pray you, grant mercy, my lady! I spoke but in jest! Indeed, while the delight of your company would be reason fit, I come on a different errand — Aiiee! Grant mercy, my lady, this creature's ears are as delicate as the wings of the dragonfly!

"I should hope this teaches you to not try to lie to me again," Heri said severely, releasing the aforementioned appendage. Belying her tone, she cuddled the creature closer to her chest, stroking the skin she had previously been abusing.

Aahh, bliss . . . the paradise of my lady's bosom . . . .

"Namtar."

Just so, my lady! Namtar perked back up to attention, eyeing the passing portraits suspiciously, as if they could hear his unvoiced words.

Heri, seeing this uncharacteristic reticence, ducked behind a tapestry of drunken monks climbing a tree and into a passageway that would take them the long way around to the Hospital Wing. The way was narrow with a low ceiling, and there was no light save for what shone through the tapestry behind them, but Heri knew this path well and could walk it in her sleep, blindly taking the corners and what steps going up there were.

"You're too paranoid, Pom-pom," Heri murmured, slowing her pace to a stroll, unbothered by the lack of light and tight quarters. "It's not as if the portraits and such can hear your thought projections as I do."

Still, I care not for eyes upon us when there be tidings to share.

Heri only hummed, breathing in the chill and dust.

'Tis as you say; not idly do I seek you out this day, Namtar said eventually with unexpected gravity. The churning of Destiny stirreth the air, the shadow of doom loometh o'er where'er ye travel. I know not what doom it shall be, whether a grim end or the betterment of your agency, but we who keep watch o'er your comings and goings agreed that no harm would come of me taking a physical role in your life for the time being.

Eyes once long closed to the plights of humanity now turn to Britannia — any contention between godlings be no mean mummer's play, and this conflict surely is the greatest congregation with godlings engaging against other godlings since the Iron Age. Gods of war have grown pleased — already hath combat stretched its fingers into numerous nations.

"The continental godborns are helping their law enforcements then?" Heri asked at once, glancing down instinctively though she saw nothing.

I little think they can little avoid doling assistance, Namtar answered, when many have been cut down in the streets without so much as a 'have at thee!' Already hath many a godling passed through the Veil by the hands of their counterparts amongst the ranks of your foe. No doubt they see now what folly it was to deny your call for coalition. I do wonder what their leaders hoped to achieve from doing so . . .
Heri's throat closed up in impotent rancour, her eyes clenching shut as well.

They had already been so scared — so petrified in their refusal, some even begging for their families to be left out of it ("Please! We're not blessed for battle!") . . . and now . . . .

"Are you telling me they're being targetted specifically?" she demanded.

*Your intent to rally cooperation with your declaration of your descent was not lost upon the one who seeketh to flee from me*, Namtar said simply, his tail brushing against her elbow. *He now commandeth his halfborn minions to seek out others of their make and do away with them should they refuse to join his ranks. He hath e'en ended some by his own hands, his grudge bitter indeed. I suppose it cold comfort, my lady, but most refused had they been given the chance to answer at all. They kept their honour if only in death.*

"They shouldn't have to!" Heri snapped, coming to a stop and stomping her foot. "This entire thing—! It's so—! Ugh!"

Turning so that her back was to a wall, Heri dropped to the floor with her legs tucked underneath her and glared furiously into the darkness, her upper lip curling and baring her teeth.

Since Voldemort's mass takeover of the European criminal underbelly, the crime-rate had skyrocketed, and law enforcement officers were being run ragged keeping up. Dark creatures and Beings ran rampant, attacking villages seemingly at random. Every day there was a new story about another assault on high-trafficked locations or government offices, the number of casualties and injuries becoming frankly ridiculous. Every day there was another headline screaming about riots for or against Voldemort's attempt at his international coup d'état.

Despite their stance of focusing their forces within the boarders, the British ministry was scrambling to keep up with what they saw as an unexpected manoeuvre on the Voldemort's part. Voldemort's focus had been almost exclusively on Britannia during his previous rise, but his strategy was now turned on its head: he was sending out teams with smaller numbers, but in greater quantities, and to farther out — much farther out; Heri heard about some of the Asian nations panicking at signs that the Death Eaters had reached them as well. From the grunts captured and/or killed, it was proven that recruitment had become international.

Aurors and other law enforcement agents in all nations had more or less been given free-pass to fight back with lethal force, but there was only so much that could be done when the Death Eaters attacked out of nowhere and left as suddenly as they appeared. Often all there was to do when the Aurors did arrive was stem what damage they could to the area and cart off anyone still alive the hospital. Any minion or underling they manage to detain either knew nothing worth knowing or was killed via the Dark Mark to prevent any information leak. The foreign ministries were furious, but what could they do?

The foreign ministries could rage at Minister Scrimgeour and his administration apparently, and that's exactly what they did as well. They hadn't taken the British minister's refusal to allow them access to Heri well at all, defaming him in the international newspapers and threatening all sorts of unreasonable things (despite never explaining what exactly they were hoping Heri would do for them). Meanwhile, unmindful of the bad press and absolutely unbothered that he was kicking the hive of an already swarming mass of hornets, Minister Scrimgeour vetoed Heri's induction into the International Confederation of Wizards, saying he wouldn't risk her potentially getting attacked and/or abducted by being outside of British territory.

Heri wasn't too bothered by that particular restriction being put upon her — Professor Dumbledore had told her that her nomination had come by popular vote by the other members of the
Confederation, but he himself had not been in favour, sharing Minister Scrimgeour's reasoning. Besides that, any benefit she might have gotten from joining was made moot by the other ministries mobilising their forces against Voldemort already any way. With no other merit to be milked on that front, Heri instead focused on training the DA and directing alumni towards the Order of the Phoenix if they had aspirations to be directly involved in the fighting.

When Heri had finally accepted that there was no way to oust the Death Eater sympathisers within the Wizengarnot who as of yet have not committed any unlawful acts nor acted in violence, she had no choice but to turn her attention to her only other means of combatting Voldemort: the Defence Association. No, she wasn't indoctrinating them so that they would join up with the Order as they graduated, but every child who was skilled enough of escape and live another day was one more child that might grow up and contribute to pulling wizarding Britain out of the mentality of discrimination of species and blood-statuses. It was that discrimination that birthed Voldemort in the first place, and Heri had no plans for letting it linger any longer than it had to.

Heri's efforts with the DA were not the last-line of defence, though — the other nations weren't exactly rolling over and dying. Vigilante groups like the Order of the Phoenix began popping up as well, two or three even in the larger nations. Some wanted nothing to do with the Order on the grounds that the Britons obviously weren't as effective as they should have been, but others were happy to ally themselves with the group who were well-experienced with battling Death Eaters and undermining their goals when they could. There was Jernklørene in Norway, the Strely Peruna from Western Russia, and the Mahnwache der Erdhenne in Germany to name a few. Amongst those numbers were godborns as well.

Unfortunately, having 'out' godborns caused the Death Eaters to target the groups with said godborns as members. Voldemort seemed to have learned well from his dealings with Heri, and he was taking no chances. It was this purposeful culling of godborns openly advocating against him that frightened off those with weaker spines, cowing the ones that claimed to be useless in a fight even more.

But the non-combative godborns were already scared stiff! They had done nothing! They were civilians that didn't even voice any intent to oppose him! There was no need to seek them out and kill them just for existing!

"I suppose that is his way, though," Heri gritted out. "Scare tactics and 'making examples' out of people — just his sort of play! Maybe I ought to pin down one of his and give an example of my own!"

Visions of putting her basilisk fang and her trusty box-cutter to use filled her with a heavy but satisfying thrill. Oh, the screams she could rip from them . . . .

*Certainly, shall that make a statement,* Namtar said in response, rubbing his furry head into her shoulder.

Heri fumed for a moment more before she closed her eyes and leaned her head back, resting it against the cold stone wall.

"Aren't you supposed to scold me and tell me not to think like that? 'You shouldn't say things like that, Heri! We'd be no better than them!' As if we don't already use destructive hexes against them any chance we get," she said derisively.

*Who am I but a servant? Tis not my place to correct you e'en if I did think in a contrary manner.*

"Oh, stop that," Heri grumbled, going back to petting his ears. "You're Death, for goodness sake!
It's not right for you to think of yourself as a servant — you're supposed to bow to no one! No one should be able to command a facet of the Balance. It's not right!"

And ye are all about what be 'right', are ye not? Then it should cause no wonder that ye abhor what cuts life short upon a whim, what would extend life beyond what be natural, and hath yet to be punished for these acts. The self-styled 'lord' is an embodiment of everything that is unjust and wrong by the rules of Balance — he made himself your natural foe ere ye were e'en born in mortal flesh.

Heri snorted.

"Is that your way of saying I don't need a scolding because how I think shouldn't be shocking to those who already know how much I hate injustice and imbalance?"

*Just so.*

"Why don't you ever just say so?" she griped, shifting and rising back to her feet.

As they resumed their trek to the Hospital Wing, Namtar continued to inform her of minute details not shared by the international news outlets or through diplomatic conferences. Voldemort's take over of the Dark Wizards had not actually gone unopposed by all of the said criminals, but the biggest hotbed of opposition on that front — in Austria — had been wiped out a fortnight ago, and now Austria had the dubious 'benefit' of having only Death Eaters to contend with. Then there were the rusalki in Scandinavia who, despite being notorious for cheerfully luring and consuming anyone available, refused to work with other Dark creatures on Voldemort's command and yet also refused to eat the Death Eaters either, claiming they were contaminated and disgusting. France was in *this* state, and Finland was having troubles with *that*, and Luxembourg, Spain, Bulgaria, Poland. . . .

Namtar went on about rebellions here and pillagings there all through his examination by Madam Pomfrey, testing Heri's ability to maintain two conversations at once without letting on.

"I don't know what to tell you, Miss Potter," Madam Pomfrey said after she had healed up Namtar's eye as best as she could, even fixing him up with a little eyepatch in a fit of fancy. "By all rights, this creature should already be dead. I don't know how it's not, and the fact that it's still alive even with more than *half* of its organs already shut down. . . ."

"Sheer stubbornness I guess," Heri answered with a helpless shrug. "He's always just done what he wants. Is there some way I can make his organs start up again?"

Madam Pomfrey shook her head definitively.

"There's nothing for it," she declared, brusque. 'It's beyond recovery! What's decayed cannot be brought back! And there's no healthy bit of the organs left to regrow from. I'm no veterinarian, but I say you'd be best off making it as comfortable as you can before it inevitably dies."

"I see. . . ."

Hери didn't know what else to say. Namtar's vessel was *already* dead — it's not like she could say anything to convince a medical professional that it should be otherwise.

The matron winced then, her expression softening.

"I'm sorry, Miss Potter. That was callous of me. But I can't say he has much longer to live."

"It's alright, ma'am," Heri assured her, scooping Namtar up again. "I already figured that was the
case. I'll just have to make the best of it until then."

"I suppose. . . ." the matron agreed. "Is your inhalant still sufficient?"

"Yes, ma'am. The current dosage is just right."

"Very well — off with you then."

Bidding farewell to the school nurse, Heri immediately about-faced and made for the Hufflepuff dorms as quickly as she could. Shifting Namtar into one arm and checking her pocket-watch, Heri saw that it was now fourteen minutes to seven, still a good, solid hour before her first class of the day. Still. . . .

*Wherefore this haste, my lady?* Namtar asked, curled up like an infant in the crook of Heri's elbow.

"Ollie was scheduled to wake me up about fifteen minutes ago," Heri murmured under her breath, noting the Ravenclaws already coming down from their tower. "Even if someone told her I'm fine, she'd panic. No doubt she's panicking *right now* — Poor dear takes her job so seriously."

As Heri predicted, Ollie was a mess of tears when Heri got back, and she remained clingy for the rest of the day.

It was only after she was about to use her Time-Turner to return back to the night before that Heri remembered something possibly important.

"Namtar," she called, rousing the possessed kneazle from its doze on her shoulder and catching Ollie's attention from where she stood at Heri's hip. "You said something about . . . about people keeping an eye on me?"

*Pray pardon, my lady?*

"This morning," Heri clarified, untucking a bit of the Invisibility Cloak from where it was caught on a hair-stick. Ollie helped by pulling the material to the side. "When I asked you why you're in a meat-suit. You said something about . . . about people keeping an eye on me?"

*Just so,* Namtar confirmed. *I am but one face of Death, one manifestation of many. Though in sooth we are all the same phenomenon . . . think of us as personality traits with independent forms. This Namtar is not Thanatos nor Hela — this Namtar cannot take their form nor their place should the concept of them be invoked. Death is death and e'er shall be, but the valkyries shan't know the minds of the shinigami, and what tasks the Morrigan complete cannot be laid at the feet of Baron Samedi.*

Heri took a moment to digest that.

"Okay, so . . . what does that . . . have to do with my question?"

*All eyes of Death look to you,* Namtar elaborated patiently. *But 'tis only this Namtar that can appear to you while ye are of mortal flesh, for only this servant has ties close enow by way of your father's domain. As ye are of Mesopotamia, only a Death of Mesopotamia may appear to you. In sooth, Thanatos has a similar privilege, but he may not yet exercise his right until such time that ye be acknowledged by your lady mother.*

Heri could only goggle at him.
"But why? Why would you lot even want to?"

Surely Death had better things to do? What had Heri even done to earn such interest? Okay, yeah, there was a prophecy and all that, but deities usually couldn't care less when it had nothing to do with them.

Namtar rubbed his cheek against hers.

_We are many and we are varied, but we are united in our vigil of you. Not only to this Namtar are you considered mistress; not only this Namtar bendeth the knee in fealty._

Heri's breath caught. _All . . . ?_

"But _why_?" she asked again, almost pleading, feeling utterly lost.

And Namtar told her of the Deathly Hallows.

Oddly enough, it took Heri being accosted in Hogsmeade by an overwrought stranger for her to realise that not everyone viewed the gifts she'd inherited from her father as something to be celebrated. Not that she had assumed that everyone was _celebrating_, but the worst she had been expecting was indifference.

There she was, retrieving a notebook she wanted from a tall shelf within Scrivenshaft's, using a tenaculum for better reach, when she was roughly shoved off her feet, a screech of alarm sounding in her ear.

"AAARGH! MONSTER!" was bellowed as Heri's temple smacked against the edge of a shelf, sending a spear of agony through her head. "Somebody! There's a Dark Creature in here!"

Whatever else the person was babbling was lost on Heri, who was distracted by the pain sizzling from the right side of her head and the thunderous footfall and exclamations heading their way.

"What's this?!"

"— going on —?"

Befuddled, her pulse throbbing loudly in her ears, Heri tried to get back on her feet, her tenacula flailing and lashing disorderly in her muddled state. Her vision was doubled and blurry.

"What in Merlin's name —?!"

"Get away from my lady!" she heard Ollie wail.

"MONSTER!" the original voice shrieked again, a woman Heri discerned, taking in the feminine shape of the fuzzy blob in her sight. This time, said fuzzy blob rushed Heri directly, clawed hands scrabbling at her hood.

"She's _mad_!"

"'Ere! Get off 'em, yeh loony!"

"Dark _filth_!"

Fingers at her throat and fingernails digging into her scalp, Heri could only react, sending a wild punch into the other woman's jaw as her tenaculum ripped the crazy bitch's hands away. She hissed as
strands of hair were ripped from her head in the process. Her hood was knocked off as well.

"Miss . . . Miss Potter?"

Heri looked up at the hesitant pronunciation of her name, her expression in a fearsome glare because of the stinging in her eyes. Her pupils were at maximum range, fully consuming the green of her irises and the whites of her sclera, drawing startled gasps and yelps from those in front of her. Many scurried back, stumbling over each other in their rush.

"What?" she croaked, blinking hurriedly to get herself back under control. She rubbed away the petty tears that came with getting her hair pulled with the heel of her palm, the other hand going up to comb her ruined braid back into some semblance of order. "Who just . . . ? Why . . . ?"

"Miss Heri! Hiss Heri!" Ollie sobbed, huddled to Heri's side, hands tremulously hovering over where she could reach.

"Miss . . . Potter?" Someone else said, this time one of the few that hadn't scrambled away from her. Judging by what he was wearing, he worked there.

At that moment, two Aurors came bursting in, wands drawn and ready. On their tail were Zacharias and Sally-Anne, both wild-eyed and panting.

"What's going on here?" one of the Aurors demanded. It was Officer Peasegood, one of the Aurors that regularly acted as guard for Heri when she was on official business away from Hogwarts. He took one proper look at Heri and was then immediately at her side, his wand pointing threateningly at the lingering crowd.

"Well?" Officer Peasegood repeated as the other Auror and Heri's two friends surged forward as well.

"Erm, th-tha' nutter . . . o-ver there . . ." said the intimidated shop-clerk, indicating the woman now sprawled on the floor in a corner who was being guarded by a couple of older men. "I didn' see the star' of i', bu-but from wha' I saw, she's the one wha' wos attackin' Miss . . . erm, Miss Potter? Tha' is Miss Potter, innit?"

"Is that even a question?" Zacharias growled, holding Heri steady with an arm around her waist. "Who else do you think it could be?"

"W-wwe-well . . . ." the confused man stammered, looking helplessly at her bobbing tenacula.

"Is she possessed?!" another person blurted, a gentleman with an absurd hat shaped like an overturned cauldron.

"'Possessed'?!" Zacharias echoed giving the second man a scornful look. "What in Merlin's name —?" but then he caught sight of Heri's blacked-out eyes and double-took. "Oh. By the gods, Perks," he said, grimacing at Sally-Anne, "The Hell are you doing? Snap her out of it!"

"Don't you snarl at me, you twat!" Sally-Anne snapped, rubbing Heri's back and lifting her head. In a quieter tone, she asked, "Hey, there . . . Are you alright?"

Heri eventually came to completely, and then it was just a matter of assuring everyone that she was indeed herself and not being impersonated or possessed in any way.

Zacharias was quick to drawl that the woman that had attacked was "lucky she wasn't worse off considering she just provoked a battle-blessed godborn into combat-readiness!" Likewise, Sally-
Anne was just as quick to cut in that Heri was still Heri, and that anyone who would attack her just because they'd never seen her god-given attributes before didn't deserve her acting on their benefit.

Unsurprisingly, these assertions didn't soothe any of the bystanders, even after Heri tried to brush it off as her own fault for never letting it be publicly known that she had physical manifestations of her father's powers. After the still unconscious woman was taken into custody for assault, many of those who were present trickled off with uncertain glances back at her.

Heri's heart clenched at the thought of those looks — distrustful. It had been a long while since such looks had been directed at her. Surely no one would have any reason to doubt sweet, little Heri Potter — the media's darling and the nation's current favourite idol — surely no one would think she would mean any harm. It was almost staggering how shocking it was to see such a look now! Why, the last time someone had looked at her like that, she had been . . .

She had still been living with the Dursleys.

Her jaw tightened at the realisation.

So this was how it would be. She had put on a good face for so long — had done her best to do everything that was expected of her exactly right . . .

But she'd let herself become complacent. What had she been thinking, just using her tenacula out in open where anyone could see? So what if popular opinion was on her side? People were running scared, jumping at shadows, and she just oh-so-casually used a gift of the netherworlds? She was lucky they hadn't formed a mob! She was lucky that it had only been one crazy woman —!

But . . . A niggling thought crept upon Heri. Had the woman really been mad? Outside of her screaming tone, she had been fully articulate in her speech — she even had the presence of mind to call for help against what she saw as a threat. Granted, she tried to attack said threat herself without using her wand, but Dark Creatures of the sort that were attacking on Voldemort's behalf these days were more likely than not to be impervious to whatever spells common hedge-magi were capable of. If she was fully convinced Heri was a Dark Creature . . . Well, was she actually wrong?

The netherworlds . . . And then her father . . . Nergal swore there was no evil in him, but he . . . he was a Dark god, wasn't he?

"What troubleth you, my lady?"

Heri looked up at the sound of the question, starting a bit when she saw that Namtar was outside of his mortal vessel. A quick survey of the otherwise empty dormitory — even empty of Ollie who had gone to play with the house-elves in the kitchen — revealed that the dead kneazle Namtar was inhabiting was curled up on her trunk as if it was asleep. She grimaced at the thought of dead-thing germs being near where she slept, but she couldn't work up her regular indignation because of how low she was feeling.

"Nothing you can do anything about," she sighed, turning back a Ghoul Studies' essay she hadn't finished yet.

Namtar pondered Heri's statement for a moment. Then he draped himself over her and melted himself down until he was a black shroud hung around her shoulders. Like a hungry lethifold, he then wrapped himself tenderly around her neck. No doubt this was his own way of offering comfort.

"Still shall I lend a ready ear if ye will it," he murmured, mouthing against the side of her neck and tickling the skin there.
They sat at her bedside desk in pointed silence as Heri stewed in her thoughts. She didn't like to linger on thoughts about things that upset her that she likewise had no control over, but . . .

"These powers . . ." Heri began eventually, her gaze catching on the word 'monstrous' within her opened textbook. "My powers I mean . . . They're not . . . They're not Light, are they?"

Heri felt eyes blink into existence against her chin. One end of her 'scarf' then reared up like a curious snake, revealing a dozen eyes of several different colours, shapes, and sizes peering out at her, all appearing speculative.

"Not of 'Light' ye say?" Namtar mused, his mouth sliding from where it had been at her ear and up to the crown of his 'head', shoving aside two or three eyes. "How curious ye would say so."

"But I'm right, aren't I?"

"I know not in what manner knowledge of such petty labels would serve you, my lady."

"You don't know —? I'm supposed to be Light!" Heri cried with frustration, smacking her desk with the flat of her palm. "That's what this war is all about! That bastard of a Dark Lord is trying to uproot and destroy everything he thinks is Light and therefore 'weak' — and my parents died fighting on the side of the Light — and my godfather had to run away from his Dark family so he wouldn't be killed or worse — and that traitor Pettigrew went Dark and betrayed my family to their death — an-and those Death Eaters are invading other nations and killing people in the name of the blood-purity and the Dark Arts — and—! And—!"

Heri grabbed Namtar by his 'neck' and pulled him so that they were nearly nose to 'nose'.

"I'm supposed to be a champion of the Light," she stressed to him, panting slightly, utterly serious. "I'm the one everyone's expecting to defeat Voldemort at some point — to be the antithesis of everything about him. I supposed to be Light."

Unbothered by the clenched hand holding him in place, Namtar observed Heri steadily.

"By my reckoning . . ." he enunciated slowly, eyes keen and unblinking, "'Light' hath ne'er been an epithet attached to our realm — nor to any Being that delighteth in our domain. Yet isn't not just so? What Light is there to be had on the battlefield when drenched one be in the blood of one's enemies? Or in the dying throes of a beast, cut down by beings that hunt not for the fulfilment of hunger but for the pleasure of satisfaction? Shall it be found in the rot of pestilence, borne on the putrefaction of carrion waste?"

Namtar gave the equivalent of a decisive nod.

"Disease . . . decay . . . slaughter . . . the many faces of death . . . Surely no Man can say there be Light amongst these," he concluded.

Heri's stomach dropped lower and lower as Namtar spoke. Her head now bent so that her forehead nearly rested against her desk.

"Then I am as Dark as the monsters I defame and fight against," she breathed, eyes heating and pricking. "I oppose them . . . but I bring death like they do — I'm Dark too."

There was a moment when all Heri could hear was her own shuddering hiccoughs for air and the nearly silent plck . . . plck of despondent tears, a pounding headache of impotent frustration pulsating across her skull.
All this time denouncing them as lower than low . . . and it turned out that she was nothing more than a pathetic hypocrite! Hoisted up and twaddling on about nothing but sanctimonious cant . . . . Hypocrite — ambidexter — She held 'morality' over their heads, and all this time she was nothing but a fraud! How disgusting . . . .

"Hath my lady killed for sport then?"

Heri's head shot up at the abrupt inquiry.

"What?!" she gaped. "'Killed for' —? How could you —?! No! I'd never!"

Accompanying her misery-crumpled features and dripping orifices, an outraged glower twisted her face further until any bit of gentle beauty she was claimed to possess was erased and replaced with the jagged snarl of a cornered beast of prey. She may be a hypocrite, but she wasn't going to let anyone insinuate that she would dole out executions — trampling over the sanctity of Life and Death! — on a mere whim!

"I dare you to ask me such a thing again."

Namtar looked contrite as he could without a proper face — but was unintimidated.

"Then what disease, decay, or slaughter hath been wrought at your hands?"

Heri only glared, demanding he make his point before she ran out of patience with him.

Namtar obliged.

"Verily when a Man thinketh of death," he continued, "he thinketh with dread and trembleth with rightful terror. Who would long for The End when life be sweet and filled with pleasure? Surely death is a shrouded and frightful thing when it bringeth the end to a happy lifetime.

"Yet for another who hath known naught but desolation and sorrow, what is life but a haze of misery? What of the old and infirm whose life hath become suffering and impairment? Do they not yearn for the surcease of their pain?

"When life is anguish, can it yet be Light?"

Tears dried on Heri's blotchy cheeks as she listened.

"Men oft moan of 'the Shadow of Death', yet what light is seen by the crippled hound that shan't e'er run again? Or by the hobbling crone with blinded eyes and failing lungs? Pain with every step . . . crawling, scrabbling forward day by day —drowning in sehnsucht, knowing full well there shan't be a return to any previous joy, if there e'er was any. Death cometh whether to relief or despair, by purpose or mischance, but when it is, all suffering known in life be no more.

"And that is what ye are, my lady," Namtar asserted, coiling around her forearm in a parody of an embrace. "That is what ye bring into this mortal plane — not grief, but the end of it."

Heri laughed wetly, brushing a tickling trickle of saline from her jawline.

"Is this your odd attempt at making me feel better?" she asked, folding her arms in and consequentially cradling the serpent-like creature to her. She then sighed, the wobbling up-turn of lips sliding off her face. "It doesn't change the facts though."

"And the facts have not changed," Namtar replied. "My lady simply hath yet to know them in
"What else is there to know? Even if death isn't always a tragedy, my father is the god of inflicted death, of purposeful killing! He isn't the end of suffering, he's the enforcement of it!"

"But what does that have to do with you? Ye are your lord father's child, not his own self."

"You talk like I'm just a normal human — you know very well that godborns are more or less clones given independent—"

"Are ye not your lady mother's child as well?"

"You know damn well what I mean!" Heri shrieked, curling into herself. "I have the same inclinations and tendencies! I share their disposition and mentalities, simply toned down to fit into a mortal vessel! It was written in my very essence as I was formed! I will —! I will . . . I will likely default to i-inflicting death instead of . . . instead of simply disarming and restraining my enemies as well," she ended in a whisper, remembering well her fits of temper as well as the violent threats she made towards the Death Eaters when she was properly worked up.

"And think ye that a drawn-out end be better than a swift release?" Namtar prompted. "Ye are in the middle of war, my lady. 'Tis inevitable that ye will cause pain at some point — have ye not already done so in the punishment of those who cross you? Yet e'en then ye did not prolong it, cutting short the Just act because in your mind 'twas not Good to do so. But my lady is a creature of self-imposed justice, one who despiseth injustice in any form — would it not be Just to see the perpetrator complete their rightful retribution? Just because something is not Good does not mean 'tis not Just."

Heri scowled at him.

"It's not my place to say what is the right amount of consequences for an act of wrong-doing. I don't make the rules, I simply know they exist and recognise them. It's not my place to extend any sort of retaliation beyond making the person know that someone else knows very well that they deserve some. I believe in justice, but I am not Justice itself."

Namtar sighed.

"Truly my lady inundateth herself with incapacitating convictions. Your melancholy in its whole stemmeth from the belief that death and causing death be Dark. But what is the make of Dark—?"

"Any magic that obtains a tint greater than one hundred on the Miasmic Opacity scale, which can only be achieved by the use of blood, pain, physical intimacy, or death as a source of power or the intended effect," Heri fired off right away, eyes narrowed and gaze pointed. "We learned that at the beginning of the year in Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"That is correct on a thaumaturgic basis," Namtar agreed amicably, "but what on the basis of the corruption or lack thereof of a Being's disposition? Mortal Beings of no magic — as the unendowed humans be . . . can they not also be classified as Dark? Surely ye have heard of or seen magickless humans considered Dark?"

"Of course I have! But I'm not talking about being prone to negative emotions or being interested in the macabre or-or —"She waved a hand about furiously, " — whatever! I'm talking about being dangerous and violent!"

"Indeed that be your summation of 'Dark', but does that definition suit the collective that wizards as a whole pinpoint as Dark? Be what the governance of this nation declare to be Dark be Dark by
my lady's own account? An it differs, who is to say which definition be correct?"

He allowed Heri to contemplate that for a moment.

"And what authority saith that Dark is Wrong or Evil?" he then continued. "These things are not synonymous. And just because something be Right or Just does not mean it be Good. Ye yourself believe that being completely Just is not Good of you, nor Right for you to do. Surely the Light thing to do is to be fully Just, but ye say 'tis not your place, and that to be unerringly Just would inflict unnecessary pain — pain which you say is Dark. So, by that reasoning, to be Just is to be Light and Dark at the same time? But ye loathe the idea of being Dark . . . ."

"Which is exactly why I don't try to enforce any sort of official judgement myself," Heri asserted with a nod. "I can't go around forcing my own biased beliefs of people — I am not the authority nor government that they agreed to respect and heed, so I can't go punishing people for not conforming to a code they never agreed to follow. It wouldn't be right for me to do so."

"It soundeth to me that ye would rather be Good than explicitly Light."

"I . . ." Heri's brows furrowed in conflict. "I guess . . . I don't know how to be Light. It seems truly beyond me." She sighed gustily. "I suppose I'll have to settle with Neutral — anything is better than Dark."

"But what is wrong with Dark? Yes," Namtar hurried along when it looked like Heri would interrupt, "ye say Darkness is defined by blood, sexuality, pain, and death, but those things in themselves are not wicked nor reproachful. Blood is life-force; sexuality can bring forth life; pain can be suffered on the behalf of others; and death is natural in the end.

"A main point of human morality is that to kill something is Wrong — but do not all mortal things kill for food? Animals and vegetation are likewise living things. But killing for sustenance has long been accepted as acceptable because there is a true need, not just an errant want.

"But what about the killing of another Being for the sake of rightful punishment? Execution is still a thriving practice in this day and age, albeit for the worst of offenders. It is Just — it is Right for one to suffer what they inflict onto their victims. A Just Man might kill a criminal for outstanding crimes by the judgement of a court, or in self-defence, or to protect another — but is that not still killing?

"In sooth, I would say that killing be neither Good nor Evil, but it can be Right or Wrong depending on the intent of the Being acting. And how does that fall on the spectrum of Light and Dark? A killing can be Just, so wouldn't that make it Light? Ah, but it is causing death, so surely it is Dark!"

"But I don't want to kill anyone," Heri said in a tiny voice, looking at her hands.

"Then I suppose you could avoid conflict altogether and remain unquestionably Light," Namtar supplied. "Never again to lay harmful hands on another. But to let crimes go unopposed and unchallenged . . . that would not be Good nor Just, would it? For certain it would not be Right."

Heri groaned and slumped over her desk.

"Why couldn't this one thing be easy?" she muttered to herself.

There was more silence again, but this time it was less charged, more assuaged and lulled. The clock over the door of the dorm room tck-tck-tck'd quietly, marching it's way along to five in the evening, the time when the rest of the girls would be returning from Hogsmeade. By that time she was supposed to have finished her essay and be cleaned up for dinner — instead, she was a mess of
bodily fluids and still eight inches away from finished with her assignment.

She rolled her eyes over to where Namtar was a puddle of goo next to her stack of textbooks.

"You do know that this doesn't actually solve any of my problems, yeah? Even if we now both agree that being Dark isn't necessarily a bad thing, that doesn't change the fact that I'm supposed to be the figurehead of the Light side."

"Does the 'Light' in that title denote magic or moralistic disposition?" the other-worldly Being queried.

"I . . ." The question gave her pause. "I don't . . . actually know. Huh! I guess . . . ."

She thought for a moment about the people she knew about that publicly advocated for the Light.

"Mmm . . . magic, I suppose," Heri finally concluded, lifting herself up and resting her chin in the cradle of her palm. "The entire political conflict that started this madness started post-World War II — back when Voldemort was still sane — was something to the effect that the Dark Arts should be legal to use, and that 'Muggle-baiting' — essentially the harassment and even torture of Muggles — should just be a thing that's done with no consequence. Conversely, the 'Light side' was in direct disagreement and wanted to increase the penalties for using the Dark Arts and Muggle-baiting. Eventually — around the start of the seventies — Voldemort completely lost the plot and started killing people and working towards the take-over of Britain . . . and — well, here we now are."

"I think, my lady," Namtar responded carefully after digesting what she told him, "that it would be more correct to say that this is a matter of Dark morals instead of magic — your Dark witches and wizards are called so because of poor moral character and practising the Dark Arts. Dark magic is one thing unto itself — a minor Stinging Hex is Dark magic — but an act of the Dark Arts would be slaughtering an army and raising their undead cadavers to serve as minions."

"O-oh," Heri said faintly, dumbstruck at the thought of such a heinous thing. A drop of hope swelled within her. "Then I couldn't be considered. . . ."

Then unease took her again.

"But I suppose such acts would be another facet of my father's domain."

"Ye torture yourself for no end," Namtar sighed.

Heri just poked at the frayed end of one of her quills listlessly.

"Know ye the turn of phrase Men use when their comrades stand upon the precipice?" he asked, continuing when Heri only tilted her head in a vague shrug. " 'Do not walk into The Light!' they plead and beg. And yet so many do exactly that, and willingly so — Countless numbers have since before written history.

"Why is that, do ye know? Why surrender to it? Death is Dark in and of itself. It may be Right, but it is never Light. Yet even those who have happy lives will go quietly.

"Those Men still eager for what life has to offer know not that 'The Light' they speak of is you, my lady," — Heri shot him an incredulous look — "your culmination," he clarified, "what ye are beyond this mortal embodiment: the end of the suffering known in life, the quiet mercy of death.

"Death hath ever been of the Dark, true — but ye are the mercy of it," he told her with stark solemnity. "Mercy is not always Light — nor it is not always Right nor Just — but it hath ever been
"I think more than needing ye to be a symbol of everything Light, your people desperately need ye as ye are: Good — and that has ne'er been a challenge for you."

It was sunny when the school was attacked. It was stark daylight outside on a Friday afternoon. Children were roaming all over, many out by the Black Lake, and the mood was so light that it took longer than it should have for them to realise that it was not shrieks of laughter that they were hearing.

It was pleasantly windy when a third-year boy — a half-blood from Wales with an over-protective aunt — was sliced clean through his middle with a Slashing Curse. His intestine spilt out onto the hands of one of his year-mates who had tried to catch him as he fell, bisected organs slipping through her fingers. She didn't have time to scream before a Blasting Hex took off her head.

Death Eaters spilt out from who-knows-where before anyone knew what was going on, firing spells wildly, taking no notice of what or who they hit. Portraits exploded, pillars crumbled — any student caught unaware were cut down before they knew what was going on. It was utter madness!

And it was all Heri's fault.

Heri knew this as she bellowed for the DA to organise and get the younger students to safety, holding back what enemies she could as the teachers arrived on the scene.

When Crabbe and Goyle started disappearing from the Marauder's Map, she should have known they were up to no good. She should have, but she'd given them not a thought. After Malfoy left the school — hidden within the safety of Grimmauld Place with his parents — she had dismissed them as unimportant, thinking them too stupid and incompetent for anything without their ring-leader. Now they were all paying the price for it.

"STOP THEM BEFORE THEY GET TO THE DOORS!" she bellowed, an over-powered Banishing Charm brutally thrusting a couple of Death Eaters away from a group of children running for safety. "WHERE ARE THOSE SHIELDS?! SHIELDS UP, SHIELDS UP! ATHENE'S AEGIS!"

Whatever Fates there were in the world, they took pity on Heri, and the teachers, upper-year students, and whatever Aurors who were on duty managed to hold back what invaders there were while the younger students were rushed off into hiding.

"SIGMA FORMATION!" Heri called out, backing up a seventh-year facing a hulking brute of a Death Eater.

Like pieces sliding into place, the students congregated like clockwork, units moving together like well-oiled machines. Mobile shields encircling each unit, they pulled in younger students into their centre, bulldozing down what they could, trampling attackers underfoot. More and more students were absorbed into the conglomerates until each unit was over twenty students strong and nearly untouchable within their combined shields.

It was awing! It was inspiring! It was a credit to everything they had worked so hard for all this time!

So wrapped up in the directing of those in front of her, Heri didn't see the Death Eater aiming at her until —
Wet viscera splattered against the back of her head.

With a yelped, Heri turned and —

"MEGAN!" she screeched, lancing the Death Eater through an eye with a Banished tree branch while he was gloating. Heri then stumbled to Megan's side, not knowing where to touch to cause the least amount of damage.

Megan coughed wetly, chunks of something coming up, and she had to vomit it out before she choked on it. The upper right part of her torso was blown out, her shoulder just barely still attached. The hole went completely through to the other side, upper rib cage and lung visible.

"No . . . no . . ." Heri sobbed. "M-M-Meg-gan . . . n-no . . . Why did you —?"

"It's — urk!" She coughed and hacked again. "Do-on't — It's not . . . it's not your fault," the bleeding girl croaked, trying to smile.

"Of course it's —!"

"No," Megan said again, fighting to stay awake. "I-it's not. Not . . . now and . . . not be- . . . fore ei'er."

"Megan?" Heri pleaded, a mess of tears. "Just hold on, okay? I'll get you to —"

"Y-y-y-y-ou kn-now it . . . won' b-be enou'," the other girl admonished, her breathing slowing, speech slurring. "Don' wor— Ergh! I jus' . . . jus' . . . 'm sorry, 'kay?" Tears leaked from her closing eyes. "I din . . . mean t' . . . Sorry I . . . H'ri . . . I . . . sor- . . . ry . . ."

"Megan?"

No reply came.

Someone must have dragged her away, but for the life of her, Heri couldn't remember who, to where, or how she got there.

Somehow, in a flurry of spell-fire and destruction, all students — the upper years included despite their protests — were finally spirited away into the dubious safety of the castle, locked in as the Death Eaters gained ground. Reinforcements still had not arrived, and it seemed for every Death Eater taken down, two or more of their opponents died with them.

Battalions of Hogwarts' suits of armour — animated by Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore — attacked with swords and spears, slicing and hacking at the invaders. At the gate, giants pounded at the re-enforced walls keeping them out, Hagrid's beasts clawing back at them. And at the Forest's edge! Though they did not attack, centaurs stood at the forest's edge, vigilant.

All this and it was still not enough.

"Come away from there, Heri," Hannah murmured, pulling on Heri's arm.

"How could I possibly?!" Heri demanded, whirling on the other girl with fire.

The other students nearby — a mixture of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws of various ages — were huddled nearly right on top of each other, cringing away from the windows. Miraculously, Hannah and Sally-Anne were with her, but the rest of her friends were scattered amongst the other clusters of students secreted away in other corners of the school.
"I should be down there!" Heri declared hotly, glaring at Sally-Anne who tried to soothe her with a hand on her shoulder. "They killed —! I'm supposed to be —!"

"You have fought valiantly," a high, cold voice rang.

Heri scrambled back to the window, a few of the braver ones joining her.

There! At the edge of the field —!

"Is that . . . ?" Sally-Anne breathed in Heri's ear, fright evident.

A lone figure materialised from a stretch of the Forest beyond where the centaurs stood vigil.

"Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery."

A horrible chill swallowed the summer's warmth. Heri's head swung to the side, and she witnessed with dread as a slew of dementors swooped out over the castle turrets like a murder of hungry crows, sending those who were already wearied to their knees with despair.

"Yet you have sustained heavy losses," Voldemort continued, as if commenting on a game of wizard's chess, a serpent within a floating orb bobbing beside his head. "If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilt is a loss and a waste.

"Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately."

As one, The Death Eaters fell back, leaving the havoc they wrought behind in stark, plain view to those sequestered away in the towers.

Voldemort's cruel eyes surveyed the damage done with all the empty regard of a shark scenting its prey.

"You have one hour," he declared. "Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured.

"I speak now, Heri Potter, directly to you."

Heri heard squeals of terror from behind her, but she paid them no mind. She watched as Voldemort looked over the battered fighters standing defensively across the green from him, her fingers crumbling the stone in her grasp.

"You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself," he said, disdain dripping from every word. "How cowardly for the one hailed as my greatest foe! No doubt you know now that it was a fool's delusion that you could ever hope to measure up to Lord Voldemort.

"Not even with all your 'godly powers'," he scoffed.

"I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Heri Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me.

"To ensure none of your devoted worshippers here decide to do anything foolish," he added, "I will be taking this one" — here he gestured sharply, Summoning forward an Order member into his clutches — "as insurance."

He broke her wand underfoot and then traced his wandtip down the side of her neck as she —
one of the new recruits — trembled, whimpering.

"We wouldn't want anything terrible to happen to her, would we? It's dangerous out here! Why, I've been told werewolves are on the prowl as well!"

He smirked callously.

"One hour."

Shadowed in the shade of a half-destroyed arch, Heri pulled out her pocket-watch and checked for the time. Nearly half of the hour allotted by Voldemort for her surrender had elapsed.

Her friends all seemed a long way away, in a far-off country; she felt as though she had parted from them long ago. There would be no goodbyes and no explanations, she was determined of that when she pretended to lock herself up in a loo, pleading the need to be alone. Ah, they should have known better — should have suspected when she took Iolanthe with her — but this was a journey they could not take together, and the attempts they would make to stop her would waste valuable time.

"You're coming back, right?"

Heri whipped around to see her cousin Dora slumped against the remains of a pillar.

"Dora!" she gasped. "What are —?"

She had thought the only Order member in the castle was Professor McGonagall! And no one was meant to be here, not when Heri had so carefully chosen routes away from the dorms and secure holding rooms!

"Came with my parents to take you home early for a post-exam celebration," Dora answered the unfinished question. "You're coming back, right?" she asked again.

Heri's throat closed, taking in how wretched the other woman looked, her hair utterly wreaked, her clothes torn and splattered with blood. Gods, why was she here?! She was supposed to be at home! Who had allowed her out of the house?! For gods' sakes, she was still breastfeeding!

Who was looking after Teddy?!

"Dora — " Heri began urgently.

"'Cos you're his godmother, y'know?" Dora carried on, talking over her, taking no notice of the younger woman's gasp. "Teddy's I mean. Me and Remus wanted to tell you earlier — never had the chance. It's not really something you say in a letter, y'know? Couldn't think of a single person that would do a better job at it than you — not when you've loved him so fiercely since before I even started to show."

Heri didn't know what to say, casting about desperately for something.

"I . . . I . . ."

"We named him for you, y'know?" Dora rambled on, drawing her knees up into her chest, her
words running more quickly. "'Theodore' — beloved by God. You're certainly god enough. . . .
Thought it was a laugh — but it fits, yeah? A godborn as his. . . .

"So you better come and give him a proper hug and kiss as his godmother when you get back, got it? We have to — have to introduce you properly."

Heri didn't have it in her to say anything otherwise.

"Of course, Dora," Heri murmured, drawing her Cloak up around her. "W-when I — When I get back. It'll be the first thing I do."

"That's good," Dora said with a nod, eyes glazed and unfocused. "You do that. You just hurry back. I won't tattle to Sirius."

Unable to add anything else, Heri pulled the Cloak fully over herself and slunk off in the direction she was originally heading, blood pounding in her ears.

To give her the right as godparent! Heri could scarcely believe it. Ah, but, why, oh, why, now? Why tell her now? Why when she was walking towards her —?

Heri felt her heart thudding fiercely in her chest. How strange that in her anticipation of death, it pumped all the harder, valiantly keeping her alive! But it would have to stop, and soon. Its beats were numbered. How many would there be time for, as she rose and walked through the castle for the last time, out into the grounds and into the forest?

Something unspeakable washed over her as she strode invisibly through the empty corridors, with that funeral drum pounding inside her. Was she scared? She had never felt quite so before. There had never really been room for fear — panic, certainly, but fear? Not like this. Never like this. What an inopportune time to finally be experiencing it.

Would it hurt? Considering the pattern of things, it surely would . . . . All those times she had thought that it was about to happen and had escaped instead, she had never really thought of the thing itself: Her will to live had always been so much stronger than her dread of dying. Yet it did not occur to her now to try to escape, to outrun Voldemort.

It would be over, she knew it, and all that was left was the thing itself: dying.

She almost envied her parents' deaths now. This deliberate, cold-blooded walk to her own destruction required a different kind of fearlessness than she had ever needed before. Was this . . . was this to be courage? Being terrified but moving forward all the same. She had never wanted to be a Gryffindor before, but now she desperately wished she had that innate trait that seemed to make the House of Lions a breed apart.

She felt her fingers trembling slightly and made an effort to control them, although no one could see her; the portraits on the walls were all empty. She felt more alive and more aware of her own living body than ever before. Why had she never appreciated what a miracle of creation she was, brain and nerve and bounding heart? It would all be gone . . . or at least, she would be gone from it. Her breath came slow and deep, and her mouth and throat were completely dry.

But what would become of her godson after this? What if the worst happened and his parents were killed as well? Who would talk care of him then? There was Sirius, but his life wasn't assured either, no matter how the thought squeezed at her heart. Then there were his grandparents—

A memory of green light and screams flashed through her mind.
No. No, there weren't his grandparents — Auntie Andromeda had died not even an hour ago, jumping in the way of a Killing Curse meant for her husband. (Like Megan had done — Heri immediately banished the thought lest she sink into despair.) Uncle Ted would be worse off than Dora currently was, and would be in no condition to take care of a child.

What precautions were being taken place for Teddy sake? Were there *any* at all?!

"Oona!" Heri called before she knew what she was doing.

With a crack, Oona appeared, confused at the seemingly empty corridor.

"Mistress is calling . . . ?" the matronly house-elf said to herself, casting her eyes around, anxiously wringing the front of her uniform.

Heri pulled down the hood of the Cloak.

"I'm here. And *listen*," she said before Oona could say anything. "You can forge handwriting, right? Or you can make a copy of my signature if you need to? What I want you to do is to write my Will and say that Teddy is to inherit all my worldly possessions when I die, and then go file it at Gringotts. Use my crests — they're at my writing desk in my room. Understand me?"

Oona quivered.

"Mistress is . . . ?"

"I don't know what arrangements are being made for Teddy," Heri continued, not acknowledging Oona's unasked question, "but I'd feel a lot better knowing his future's taken care of at least financially. And — and take care of Ollie too."

"Mistress?" Oona entreated again, this time pleading, her eyes glistening.

Heri sighed.

"Go on, Oona. That's an order."

Misery written on her face, Oona disappeared with a crack.

Resolute and somehow lightened, Heri continued on.

Invisible once more, she strode through the corridors like her feet had a mind of their own. Every once in a while, she'd pass clusters of people taking refuge where they could, tending to wounds as best and they could and huddling together for comfort. The sight made her throat ache, but she didn't let it deter her.

But then Heri stopped in her tracks.

Just within a little alcove off of the Hall of Tapestries, Luna was crouched over one of the youngest girls — A little firstie Heri had never met before — who was sobbing for her mother.

"It's all right," Luna was saying, exhaustion distorting her usual airy certainty. "It's okay now. We're going to get you to Madam Pomfrey, and then you'll be with the rest of your friends."

"But I want to go home," keened the girl. "I don't want to fight any more!"

"I know, dear," said Luna, her voice cracking. "But it's going to be all right. You'll see your mother very soon. Heri will . . . Heri . . . ."
"Heri Potter?" the little girl asked hesitantly, hope edging her tone. "M-m-my friends told me about her. She's the one who'll —? Sh-she'll save us?"

"There's nothing in the world that will prevent Heri Potter from triumphing over the Dark Lord," Luna said with unwavering certainty, destiny ringing in her every word. "Nothing. No matter what. Heri will . . . ."

Luna trailed off. Her head hung and her voice grew thick.

"She will win . . . no matter the cost."

_Oh_, Heri realised, regret tightening around her middle like a vice. Luna knew. Luna knew and she also knew that there was nothing she could do to stop it.

What a curse it must be — to always know — especially when wishing desperately for something you know would never happen.

As Heri ducked her head and made to go on, she heard, "You just rest now, dearie. Here — let's sit for a moment," and then —

"When I grow up . . . /
I will be tall enough to reach the branches . . . that you need to reach to climb the trees you get to climb . . . /when you're grown up . . . .

"And when I grow up . . . I will be smart enough to answer all the questions that you need to know the answers to /before you're grown up."

"When I grow up . . . /
I will be strong enough to carry all . . . the he-eavy things you have to haul around with you . . . /w-when you're a grown-up."

"And when I grow up . . . I will be brave enough to fight the creatures that you have to fight beneath the bed each night/ to be a grown-up."

"When I grow up . . . . . ."

The sounds of their voices trickled away as Heri walked away.

_Sneaking through the school was child's play. Hidden under the Cloak, no one saw hide or hair of her, and not even the walls of Hogwarts could contain Heri in her incorporeal form. It was only a matter of choosing which direction would be the quickest route to the forest._

_Despite it actually being the quickest route, Heri wanted to avoid going past where the remaining Aurors were collecting themselves at the front entrance. She knew Professor Dumbledore would prevent them from stopping her, but . . . . Anyway, she'd be going from a courtyard exit instead._

_Aside from her sinking dread, a deep frustration also had hold of her. Despite their best efforts, one horcrux still existed — Nagini — no doubt that damned snake Voldemort now had all but attached to his person. But why had he done so?! Did he know they were targetting his anchors? Was that why he attacked now, all of a sudden?_

_It wasn't supposed to be this way! They had made plans to capture and kill that wretched reptile!_
All they had left to do was locate Voldemort's hide-out, and Heri could have ghosted in an out before anyone knew any better! But now their plans were for naught, and one Horcrux would remain to bind Voldemort to the earth even after Heri's death. And it would be Heri's death — she would not be holding off and allowing the inhabitants of the castle to die on the off-chance some of them could escape and ambush Nagini on another day.

Well, either way, she supposed it would still mean an easier job for anybody that tried their luck. She wondered who would do it . . . .

Throughout the main passageways and corridors, the castle was effectively empty. Even the portrait people were missing from their frames; the whole place was eerily still, as if all its remaining lifeblood were concentrated in the Great Hall where the dead and their mourners were crammed.

Heri descended through the floors, at last walking down the marble staircase into the entrance hall. Perhaps some tiny part of her hoped to be sensed, to be seen, to be stopped, but the Cloak was, as ever, impenetrable, perfect.

Then Neville nearly walked into her. He wasn't supposed to be out in the open like this, but, doubtless, he was just one of many other upper year students who sneaked out and now refused to return to the hidey-holes. Currently, he was one half of a pair that was carrying a body in from the grounds.

Heri glanced down and felt another dull blow to her stomach: Colin Creevey, her annoying but endearing photographer, leader of her actual official fan-club. Sixteen though he was, he was tiny in death.

"You know what? I can manage him alone, Neville," said Oliver Wood, an Order recruit — when had he arrived? — and he heaved Colin over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and carried him into the Great Hall.

Neville leaned against the door frame for a moment and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He looked like an old man. Then he set off down toward the front entrance again to recover more bodies.

Heri took one glance back to the doors of the Great Hall. She could hear that people were moving around, trying to comfort each other. She could just make out the sounds of some adult — no doubt a parent or professor — arguing with a wayward upper-year student. It sounded vaguely of Ron. She imagined that quite a few of her friends were in there, just out of sight. She felt like she would have given all the time remaining to her for just one last look at them; but then, would she ever have the strength to stop looking? It was better like this.

She circumvented the front entrance entirely and moved down the steps of an unused breezeway out into the waning afternoon light. It was still a good hour before sunset, but the grounds seemed dim, and the deathly stillness of the air made it feel as though the entire castle was holding their breath, waiting to see whether she could do what she must.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Neville, who was bending over another body, and suddenly she was behind him, pulling off the Cloak. An idea had come to her out of nowhere, born out of a desire to make absolutely sure she would be leaving no strings left hanging.

"Neville."

Neville started as if a ghost had walked through him.
"Blimey, Heri, you nearly gave me heart failure!"

"I'm sorry," she breathed, half to Neville, half to the body of a boy she'd once taught shielding charms to.

"Where . . . where are you going?" Neville asked suspiciously, squinting at her. "And all alone as well?"

"It's all part of the plan," said Heri distractedly, waving a hand in the air. "There's something I've got to do. Listen — Neville —"

"Heri!" Neville looked suddenly frightened. "Heri, you're not thinking of handing yourself over, are you? You can't, you hear me, you absolutely can't!"

"No, no," Heri lied too easily for her own liking. "Heri, you're not thinking of handing yourself over, are you? You can't, you hear me, you absolutely can't!"

"No, no," Heri lied too easily for her own liking. "Of course not . . . this is something else. But I have to be out of sight for a while. You know Voldemort's snake, Neville? He's got a huge monster of a snake. . . . Calls it Nagini . . . ."

"I've heard, yeah . . ." he answered slowly. "What about it?"

"It's got to be killed. Professor Dumbledore knows that, but just in case he —"

The awfulness of that possibility smothered her for a moment, made it impossible to keep talking. But she pulled herself together again. This was crucial, she had to be like Professor Dumbledore in this — she had to keep a cool head, make sure there were backups, others to carry on.

A thought then occurred to her. Who knows? Maybe she and Neville had been born so closely to one another so that if one of them couldn't complete their task, there would still be one remaining to do what needed to be done. They had been equally as likely to be chosen as Voldemort's equal. Neville could finish it when she fell. The thought actually soothed something within her.

"Well, just in case he's — busy," she continued, "and — and you get the chance —"

"Kill the snake?"

"Kill the snake," Heri confirmed, taking his hand and squeezing it for emphasis.

"All right, Heri," Neville agreed, squeezing back. "I can do that. But, but — um . . . . Are you okay? You don't look too well right now."

A hysterical urge to laugh shot through her. Here they were, surrounded by dead friends and comrades, and Neville was concerned if Heri was feeling well. He really was the sweetest of boys.

"I'm fine, Neville, thank you," she reassured him. "Just make sure you look out for that snake."

Neville then seized her wrist as Heri made to move on.

"We're all going to keep fighting, Heri. You know that? We're not going to give up."

"Yes, I —"

The suffocating feeling extinguished the end of the sentence; she could not go on. Neville did not seem to find it strange. He patted Heri on the shoulder, released her, and walked away to look for more bodies.

It was the first time he had ever walked away from her, Heri realised. He usually trailed after her.
She'd never given it much thought before. But now he didn't need her approval — Neville had come into his own when she wasn't looking. A faint longing she didn't understand stirred in her gut before she dismissed it, along with every other distracting thought.

Heri disappeared under the Cloak once more and glided immaterially as to leave no trail, allowing no one to be the wiser except for the friend she had lied to.

As she was all but sleep-walking across the green, she saw that Hagrid's hut was still just visible in the shadow of the Forbidden Forest. There were no lights — Hagrid was with the others. There was no sound of Fang scrabbling at the door, his bark booming in welcome. All those visits to Hagrid, and the gleam of the copper kettle on the fire, and rock cakes and giant grubs, and his great bearded face, and taking care of Norbert before they had to send him away, playing with Enoch and the other dragon simulacrums, and afternoon teas after classes . . . .

She moved on, and then she reached the forest itself. She sank into the dark woods as she had so often done in the past.

For reasons she didn't conceptualise even to herself, Heri became corporeal once more when she was out of sight of the tree line, deciding to walk the rest of the way to where the Death Eaters had made camp.

Dementors were gliding amongst the trees; she could feel their chill. She could no longer control her own trembling. She didn't think she could muster the force for a Patronus if she needed to — she was empty of any thought save for the wonderment she felt at the immediate present. Every second shebreathed, the smell of the grass, the cool air on her face — it was all so precious. To think that people had years and years, time to waste — so much time that it dragged on — and here she was clinging to each second.

Moving at a crawl as she was toward where she knew she had to go, her hands were clenched tightly in front of her as if they were being tied together by a lead dragging her forward. Under her fingers, she could feel the Resurrection Stone squeezed between her digits.

How curious that she would be in possession of artefacts that would supposedly control death when it was she who was ultimately ruled by death. And how ironic that it was the Resurrection Stone in her hands when she would be facing a foe that she wanted to see dead beyond any sort of revival.

But, the Resurrection Stone didn't actually bring people back, did it? Namtar told her that it actually brought forth spirits temporarily — only worthwhile if you wanted to talk to someone long dead.

Actually, now that Heri was thinking about it . . . .

She closed her eyes and turned the stone over in her hand three times.

There was nothing grand or fantastical about it. Heri knew when it happened when she heard slight movements around her that suggested frail bodies shifting their footing on the earthy, twig-strewn ground that marked the outer edge of the forest.

She opened her eyes and looked around.

They were neither ghost nor truly flesh, she could see that. They resembled most closely the Riddle that had escaped from the diary so long ago, and he had been a memory made nearly solid. Less substantial than living bodies, but much more than ghosts, they moved toward her. And on each
face, there was the same loving smile.

"Dad . . . ?"

Heri's mortal father, James, was a great deal taller than her, around six feet perhaps — maybe even taller. He was wearing the clothes in which he had died, and his hair was untidy and ruffled, and his glasses were a little lopsided, like Mr Weasley's. He was handsome, Heri thought, and a lot younger-looking than she had seen in what photos she had. He loped forward with an easy grace, his hands in his pockets and a grin on his face — just a young man, barely more than a boy.

And coming up behind him was her mortal mother, Lily, whose smile was wide and bright. She, too, looked younger than she had been at her death, but not as much so as her husband. And she was every inch as beautiful as people had said, the photos in Heri's collection but a pale imitation. She pushed her long hair back as she drew closer to Heri, and her green eyes — so like Heri's own — searched Heri's face hungrily, as though she would never be able to look at Heri enough.

"M-m-mum . . . ."

"You've been so brave."

Heri could speak no more. Her eyes feasted on her mother, and she thought that she would like to stand and look at her forever, and that would be enough.

"You are nearly there," said her father, smiling warmly. "Very close. We're . . . so proud of you."

The sincerity of those words drove the air from Heri's lungs. Gods, had anyone ever said that to her before? She didn't know hearing it would shake her so.

But here they were! Her parents! The ones that wanted her so badly that they risked more than just their lives to have her . . . . There were so many questions to ask, so many things she wanted to know about them. Where to even start?

"Does it hurt?"

The childish question had fallen from Heri's lips before she could stop it.

"Dying? Not at all," her father told her, his smile dimming. "Quicker and easier than falling asleep."

"And she will want it to be quick," said her mother, looking as if she wanted nothing more than to reach out. "She wants it over."

"I didn't want you to die," Heri said suddenly. These words came without her volition. "I-if I hadn't — if I hadn't . . . been born, th-th-en . . . ."

She watched them obsessively, beseecching them to understand.

"If you had waited and had a normal child . . ." she whispered. "You wouldn't have — I'm so sorry . . . ."

"We're sorry too," said her father, his head dropping. "Sorry we never had the chance to know each other . . . . But I'm not sorry about having you when we did, and I'm not sorry about how we died. We love you, Heri, and all we've ever hoped was for you to understand. We were trying to make a world a better place, so you could live a happier life. But I won't claim that makes up for not being there for you."
"I've always understood — as soon I as knew what happened. I never held it against you."

A chilly breeze that seemed to emanate from the heart of the forest lifted the fringe at Heri's brow. She knew that they would not tell her to keep going, that it would have to be her decision.

"You'll stay with me?"

"Until the very end," her father confirmed.

"They won't be able to see you?" Heri asked, eyes darting up to where she saw dementors circling when she felt ice crept through her chest.

"We are part of you," said her mother. "Invisible to anyone else."

Heri looked at her mother, taking in her look of fierce pride. Had anyone ever even looked at her like that?

But despite the words on her tongue, this was not the time for trivial questions. By the grace of her godly father, she would see her mortal parents on the other side. For now, her task was still not done.

"Stay close to me," she breathed.

And she set off. The dementors' chill did not overcome her; she passed under it with her companions, and they acted like Patronuses to her. Together they marched through the old trees that grew closely together, their branches tangled, their roots gnarled and twisted underfoot.

Heri clutched the Cloak tightly around her in the darkness, travelling deeper and deeper into the forest, with no idea where exactly Voldemort was, but sure that she would find him. Beside her, making scarcely a sound, walked her mortal parents, and their presence was her courage, and the reason she was able to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Her body and mind felt oddly disconnected now, her limbs working without conscious instruction, as if she were passenger, not driver, in the body she was about to leave. The dead who walked beside her through the forest were much more real to her now than the living back at the castle: Her friends, her professor and all the others were the ones who felt like ghosts as she stumbled and slipped toward the end of her life, toward Voldemort . . .

A thud and a whisper: Some other living creature had stirred close by.

Heri stopped under the Cloak, peering around, listening. The shades of her mother and father stopped too. She expanded her vision and peered through the dark of the forest. Just within human-sight, she saw a flicker of firelight.

" — someone there," came a rough whisper close at hand. "She's got an Invisibility Cloak. Could it be —?"

Two figures emerged from behind a nearby tree: Their wands flared, and Heri saw Yaxley and Dolohov — two of the Death Eaters that had escaped from Azakaban — peering into the darkness, directly at the place Heri and her mother and father stood. Apparently, they could not see anything.

"Definitely heard something," said Yaxley. "Animal, d'you reckon?"

"That head case Hagrid kept a whole lot of beasties in here," said Dolohov, glancing over his shoulder.
Yaxley looked down at his watch.

"Time's nearly up. Potter's had her hour. She's not coming."

"And our lord was sure she'd come! He won't be happy."

"Better go back," said Yaxley. "Find out what the plan is now."

He and Dolohov turned and walked deeper into the forest.

Heri moved to follow them, knowing that they were leading her exactly where she wanted to go. Going immaterial again, she drew closer to them with silent footsteps. She glanced sideways, and her mother smiled at her, and her father nodding in encouragement.

They had travelled only mere minutes when Yaxley and Dolohov stepped out into a clearing that Heri knew had been the place where the monstrous Aragog had once lived. The remnants of his vast web were there still, but the swarm of descendants he had spawned had been driven out by the Death Eaters, to fight for their cause.

A fire burned in the middle of the clearing, and its flickering light fell over a crowd of completely silent, watchful Death Eaters. Some of them were still masked and hooded; others showed their faces. Two giants sat on the outskirts of the group, casting massive shadows over the scene, their faces cruel, rough-hewn like rock. A great blond Heri didn't know was dabbing at his bleeding lip, cursing under his breath. The criminal werewolf, Fenrir Greyback, skulking at the edges, chewing his long nail. Off to the side, wincing whenever Greyback wandered too close, the kidnapped Order member was tied up to a tree and gagged.

Every eye was fixed upon Voldemort, who stood with his head bowed, and his white hands folded over his wand in front of him. He might have been praying, or else counting silently in his mind — Heri, standing still on the edge of the scene, though absurdly of a child counting in a game of hide-and-seek. Behind his head, still swirling and coiling within its charmed cage was the great snake — Nagini, no doubt. Her presence was like a monstrous halo.

When Dolohov and Yaxley rejoined the circle, Voldemort looked up.

"No sign of her, my lord," said Dolohov.

Voldemort's expression did not change. The red eyes seemed to burn in the firelight. Slowly he drew his wand between his long, spidery fingers.

"My lord —"

It was Bellatrix Lestrange that had spoken. She sat closest to Voldemort, dishevelled, her face a little bloody but otherwise unharmed.

Voldemort raised his hand to silence her, and she did not speak another word, but eyed him in worshipful fascination.

"I thought she would come," said Voldemort in his high, clear voice, his eyes on the leaping flames. "I expected her to come."

Nobody spoke. They seemed scared — even more so than Heri, whose heart was now throwing itself against her ribs as though determined to escape the body she was about to cast aside. Her hands were sweating as she pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and stuffed it beneath her robes, with her wand. She did not want to be tempted to fight.
Without deliberating, she became corporeal again.

"I was, it seems . . . mistaken," said Voldemort.

"You weren't."

Heri said it as loudly as she could, with all the force she could muster: She refused to sound afraid. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw her parents vanish as she stepped forward into the firelight.

With the strangest feeling of déjà vu, Heri watched as the clearing exploded into cacophony.

All too soon, the clamour was silenced by a look from Voldemort. He then returned his gaze to her.

"Herakles Potter," he said very softly. His voice might have been part of the spitting fire. "The Girl Who Lived —"

— 'come to die' —

"— Well met, dear girl."

None of the Death Eaters moved. They were waiting: Everything was waiting. The Order member — gods, Heri didn't even know her name! — was struggling —

Voldemort raised his wand. His head was still tilted to one side, like a curious child, wondering what would happen if he proceeded.

Heri looked back into those odious vermilion eyes, and wanted it to happen now, quickly, while she could still stand, before she lost control, before she betrayed fear —

She saw his mouth move and a flash of green light, and everything was gone.

She lied face-down, listening to the silence. She was perfectly alone. Nobody was watching. Nobody else was there. She was not completely certain that she was there herself.

A long time later, or maybe no time at all, it came to her that she must exist, must be more than disembodied thought, because she was lying — definitely lying — on some surface. Therefore, she had a sense of touch, and the thing against which she lied existed too.

Almost as soon as she had reached this conclusion, Heri became conscious that she was naked. Convinced as she was of her total solitude, this did not concern her, but it did intrigue her slightly. She wondered whether, as she could feel, she would be able to see.

Upon opening them, she discovered that she had eyes.

She lay in a bright mist, though it was not like mist she had ever experienced before. Her surroundings were not hidden by cloudy vapour; rather the cloudy vapour had not yet formed into surroundings. The floor on which she lay seemed to be white, neither warm nor cold, but simply there, a flat, blank something on which to be.

She sat up. Her body appeared unscathed. She touched her face. Everything was whole.

Then a noise reached her through the unformed nothingness that surrounded her: the small soft thumpings of something that flapped, flailed, and struggled. It was a pitiful noise, yet also slightly
indecent. She had the uncomfortable feeling that she was eavesdropping on something furtive, shameful.

For the first time, she wished she was clothed.

 Barely had the wish formed in her head than robes appeared a short distance away. She took them and pulled them on. They were soft, clean, and warm. It was extraordinary how they had appeared just like that, the moment she had wanted them . . . .

 She stood up, looking around. What was this place? Was she in some space between worlds, some waiting room for the newly deceased? The longer she looked, the more there was to see. A great domed glass roof glittered high above her in sunlight. Perhaps it was a palace. All was hushed and still, except for those odd thumping and whimpering noises coming from somewhere close by in the mist . . . .

 Heri turned slowly on the spot, and her surroundings seemed to invent themselves before her eyes. A wide-open space, bright and clean, a hall larger by far than the Great Hall, with that clear domed glass ceiling. It was quite empty. She was the only person there, except for —

 She flinched and recoiled.

 She had spotted the thing that was making the noises. It had the form of a small, naked child, curled on the ground. Its skin was raw and rough, flayed-looking, and it lay shuddering under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath.

 She couldn't help but feel cold horror at the sight of it. What in all the gods' names was it?! But small and fragile and wounded though it was, she shuddered at the thought of approaching it. Nevertheless . . . she drew slowly nearer, ready to jump back at any moment. Soon she stood near enough to touch it, yet she could not bring himself to do it just yet.

 For the first time in her life, she felt like a true coward. She ought to comfort it! Shouldn't she? It was a child and a hurt one at that! But it repulsed her so on a level she couldn't explain. It tugged at a memory that was just out of her reach.

 "Ye cannot help it."

 Heri turned to see an ominous form gliding towards her from out of the mist.

 "Namtar!" she exclaimed, startling herself at the sound of her own voice. "What —? Wh-where are we?"

 He bowed his head to her.

 "Presently, we are within a manifestation of your subconscious."

 "So . . . What?" Heri's thoughts felt heavy and thick. "So, this isn't real? This is just all in my head?"

 "In sooth, this is happening inside your mind, my lady, but why should that mean that it is not real? If anything, I should think that would make it as real as any other thing in this world. Was it not from within the minds of gods that all of creation came into existence?"

 "You know very well I'm nowhere near a god," Heri said with a long-suffering sigh, the familiarity of their banter setting her at ease. She was free of fear and sadness once more.
Namtar tilted his head curiously.

"Are ye not then? Forgive this servant's thoughtless mistake . . . ."

"But never mind that! Why am I here? Is this heaven or whatever?"

He made a strange face at her words.

"Heaven indeed!" he actually scoffed. "Why would any mortal truly want to reside forever within the judgemental purview of a high-maintenance deity and his tiresome henchmen?"

"Well, whatever our equivalent is," she groaned. "Is this it? I figured it would be more . . . intimidating. Dark, and creepy, and filled with ghouls and all that."

Namtar only smiled mysteriously in response, setting off her unease.

"I-is this the waiting room or something? Geez, you'd think I'd get the VIP treatment around here! Should I pull a Malfoy and start saying 'My father will hear about this'!?" she began rambling, growing more troubled as he still said nothing. "I have to say, it is pretty nice though. A lot more 'Paradise' than 'Punishment' than I was expecting. Heh, I guess we treat our dead better than I gave us credit for. I suppose that's why I haven't read about any complaints about Irkalla before, y'know, outside of the usual dread of underworlds thing. I reckon I can get pretty comfy out here, being all dead and all—"

"Could you STOP looking at me like that?!" she finally shrieked. "I'm dead, right?! It's supposed to be over! I'm supposed to be dead! Right?! I'm supposed to . . . right?"

"And yet it seems ye are not — not yet," he answered apologetically, "not entirely. How curious, is it not? Have ye any inkling of why this might be so?"

"I've had enough with your hints and riddles for a lifetime already, thank you!" Heri snapped, crossing her arms. "Either tell me what's going on or don't!"

Namtar dipped his head in obeisance.

"Have ye not wondered why that mad man's foul enchantment upon that ring did not cause more than it did?" he asked, apparently changing topics on her. "Flesh of Man or otherwise, such a curse is not merely brushed off."

"I . . ." Heri hesitated, confused by the line of questioning. "I thought it had to do with being semideinous or maybe because my father's a Being of the underworld. I mean . . . you said he remade my body with his essence, yeah? I figured that trumped mortal magic."

He shook his head in negation.

"Your Dark Arts are forbidden for a reason. Magic be magic with little consequence of whence it doth originate."

"Well, yeah, I figured the curse was no laughing matter when it knocked me out proper. I could have told you it was a Hell of a spell considering I don't remember anything of what happened to me until they found me!"

It was a secret she had held dear to her chest for a long while, but she had no recollection of contacting anyone after leaving the graveyard. One moment she had been putting on the Resurrection Stone ring and the next she was gasping and wheezing awake — limbs jerking out of
her control; blood fresh on her tongue; vision swimming as people exclaimed above her. They had said she had collapsed on the muggle family that had let her use their telephone — she didn't tell anyone that she had no memory of ever leaving the Gaunt shack. Even now, thinking about what could have happened to her sent a frightful chill down her spine.

"Oh, my lady . . ." he rasped, a complicated look on his face, "dead ye were the moment that ring did settle 'pon your finger. Your body had simply yet to realise it."

If Heri still had a heartbeat, she imagined it would have stopped right then.

". . . Wha-what?" she croaked, face going slack.

"Flesh of Nergal your body may be, but mortal it be as any other," Namtar carried on, looking rueful. "Your soul doth wander in Limbo, and yet the tie of soul to flesh doth linger ever enow that ye do control your cadaver, slowing the deterioration despite your spiritual body steadily consuming it. Methinks this trait to be the same that did impress Lord Nergal when he did first come upon you. 'Tis a mark of my lady's conviction that this vessel is but sickly. Were ye any less steadfast to this path ye have chosen, I fear this body would long past have expired."

"Whoa! Okay!" Heri cried, bringing her hands up, eyes wide. "Let's slow down a bit here!"

Namtar obediently stood quietly at attention.

"Right then," Heri muttered to herself, looking at her hands. She looked up again, saying, "Right. You said . . . you said — erm — a-an-and . . . — hold on, hold on! Uh . . ."

"Yes?"

"Okay, um . . . I have a spiritual body and-annnd, uh, it's eating me — my physical body? My physical body th-th-that's . . . that's dead?"

Never had such absurd and baffling words left Heri's lips before.

Seeing the overwhelmed expression written all over her, Namtar conjured two grand chairs — thrones really — and gestured towards them.

"An it please ye, my lady, make use of these seats."

He then guided her by the arm and sat her down, settling into the other one after.

"As ye have known for a goodly length, those of our kind possess and consume other Beings and take on their traits whenever it striketh our fancy," he gently reminded her. "Upon your first expression and exercise of this ability, ye did consume an amortal soul-thief that did feast upon the life force of its victims via thoughts of misery, and did consume their souls after all other sustenance had been exhausted. Ye did not merely take a bite," he stressed, "Ye did swallow it whole. In doing so, you did integrate it into your own being.

"I doubt I need to explain what such an act would do to your physiology," he said mainly to himself, watching as Heri came to comprehend exactly what she had done to herself. "This servant was in no position to inform you of the possibilities at that time, but surely ye remember my words within that cavern of your enemy's treasures when ye were tempted to consume your foe's phylactery.

"With your initial act, your power of consumption grew two-fold, elevating it to the point that your poor mortal body was not enow to contain you, forcing you to slowly devour yourself lest ye
were to be ejected. Ye have effectively been possessing yourself ever since the time that cursed ring expelled your soul from your body yet ye refused to yield control over it.

"In sooth, were it not for the Resurrection Stone adorned 'pon your finger, your vessel would have failed sooner; whilst in contact with it, the curse your foe placed upon the ring cannot subdue you — additionally, your spiritual body sateth itself with the power of the stone so that it little needeth to focus upon the draining of your physical form.

"Dead ye are," he concluded at length, "and yet ye are not."

Unbidden, a string of words came to mind:

" 'Half born; half killed; half blooded; half fulfilled'," Heri breathed aloud.

"Aye."

"Aye." Namtar nodded. "No truer description of you yet exist in this world."

Heri knew that her prophecy was ever in play as she lived, but she hadn't expected it to be so literal, or play out so obviously to the point she could direct quote it as events came to pass.

"Okay . . ." Heri exhaled, gathering herself up as best she could, pointedly ignoring any freak-out in favour of focusing on the immediate present. "So why am I not fully dead now?" she probed. "I got clocked with a direct-hit Killing Curse, a verified soul-expeller. Surely that should have been enough to finish me off?"

"That is the crux of it, my lady," Namtar replied with a sigh. "In consequence of consuming yourself, your soul is presently more Flesh than it should be, and your vessel is more spirit than what normally is possible — ne'er afore hath a devouring taken such a length of time that the body lingereth betwixt states. As it is, ye do not have enow of true physicality as it is known by mortals to be expelled from.

"The Killing Curse cannot kill you — not as ye are now."

Heri's heart dropped.

"And since it can't kill me . . . ."

Namtar understood at once what she was asking.

"The sliver of soul yet remains."

The creature behind them jerked and moaned, and Heri and Namtar sat there for a while without talking.

"That's the soul shard, isn't it?" she said more than asked.


They sat in silence for even longer stretch.

"What do I have to do to properly die?" Heri finally asked, looking at the raw-looking thing that trembled and choked in the shadow beneath the distant chair.

Namtar straightened to his full height, looking utterly serious.

"Tis not enow that your enemies mean to strike you down. Presently, there is no killing blow possible that can be wrought by mortal hands, magical, semidieous, or otherwise. My lady is no
longer human enough to truly suffer from it."

Heri squeezed her eyes shut tightly at that proclamation, the notion hurting her more than she would have expected.

"Compounding onto this, the intentful worship of your nation hath been pushing you along the process of transcendence —"

"WHAT?" Heri yelped, eyes flying open.

Namtar paused, giving her a plainly confused look.

"Was that not my lady's intent when ye declared the truth of your ancestry for all and sundry to know?"

"No!" She denied, grimacing. "Why would you even think that?! Everyone was talking about the acknowledgement and faith giving strength to us in battle—"

And then Heri remembered something, making her curse and slap a palm to her forehead. Hadn't Mr Carmichael told her about that before?

"Right," she mumbled, recalling the conversation now. "Hundreds of wizards sincerely paying reverence — that's what he said, yeah? Something like that. And that would . . . would cause some degree of transition, even just the smallest degree of it . . ."

"And all this while, people nations over have been channelling earnest reverence to you," Namtar tacked on, finishing her thought. "Altars for your edification, prayers wishing for nothing more than your empowerment . . . And have they not paid honest veneration to you since the incident when ye were but a babe? Nay, I think this consequence should cause no perturbation."

"Well, what good is it going to do me now?" Heri demanded, fuming.

Heri was slowly becoming less and less human. Great. Like that really helped anything!

But, wait — didn't it?

"Hang on . . ." she muttered to herself, contemplating that train of thought. "They're empowering me or whatever. So . . . couldn't I just transition, and then —?"

"Your foe would be truly immortal by right of his shard being protected by your divinity," Namtar spoke plainly.

Damnation, she knew that. Of course, she knew that —

"And if ye complete your ascendancy, ye will be unable to die a true death."

Heri gave Namtar a strange for tacking that last statement on as if it was another reason against. Alright, she wasn't a seeker of immortality herself — but that didn't mean she was suicidal or actively sought out deathly dangers. Sure, she knew and respected death as a natural part of the Balance of the Universe, but she didn't —

Wait. Did he not know . . . ? Well, she never explicitly said it, but had she somehow given the impression . . . ? Perhaps she had. She'd never said otherwise, had she? All this time, she'd been so determined to do her duty, so hell-bent on getting it done — Did she seem eager for it? Had everyone all this time thought that she looked forward to . . . ? She never said it, did she? Not to
anyone, not out loud, not even in the sanctity of her own mind.

"I . . . I don't want to die," she finally voiced for the first time, and somehow she was ashamed. Here in front of Namtar, it felt like an insult to him.

The psychopomp blinked at her, looking honestly surprised.

"Why e'er not? Surely death shall be more peaceful after all the conflict and troubles ye have known in life?"

" 'Why?' —? Namtar! I have plenty of reasons to want to live!" she protested. "It wasn't all bad, you know — I certainly had it a lot better than other people! There was friendship — there was family as well. There was even —!" There was a blur of faces that passed through her mind along with the memory of tingling in her gut that she never allowed herself to properly name before. "There was love too," she exhaled.

Namtar looked troubled.

"I see."

For a long minute, they merely looked at each other.

"What do I have to do to properly die?" Heri asked again.

Namtar finally explained the process, which was both simple and difficult at the same time. Ultimately, it boiled down to her needing to somehow exert her divine powers to the point that her physical body — spirited as it now was — would . . . burst open, combusting outward. This was dangerous, however, because unmasked divinity blinded mortals eyes at best and caused mortal disintegration at worst when looked upon. In doing so, she risked killing comrades as well as enemies. But the horcrux within her would definitely be destroyed then, and if she could somehow make it so that Voldemort and Nagini were in the direct line of the blast . . . .

She could this. Not only could she destroy the piece within herself, but she could also assure it herself that Voldemort would go too. A weight lifted off her shoulders at the thought.

The realisation of what would happen next settled gradually over Heri in the long minutes, like softly falling snow.

"I'm going to go back now, aren't I?"

Namtar nodded reluctantly.

"There be nothing to hold you should ye decide to return to your physical vessel once more," he admitted. "Yet it be my lady's prerogative should she desire to linger within this space — though a facet of your consciousness, this plane is a location outside of the flow of time."

Despite her attachments still to the living, Heri could not deny that she was tempted by Namtar's offer. Leaving this place would not be nearly as hard as walking into the forest had been, but it was warm and light and peaceful here, and she knew that she was heading back to pain, fear, and more loss. She was so tired . . . the kind of bone-tired that sleep only seemed to make worse. Maybe if she didn't worry about Voldemort for a bit, she would feel better?

Her hesitation must have been evident, because Namtar looked hopeful for whatever reason.

"There be no reason ye must go at once," he pointed out, coaxing. "Surely my lady would only
benefit from some time to rest. Ye can collect yourself, take a respite and decide on a full plan of
attack. Surely no one would be the wiser, nor would they begrudge you your due reprieve."

He stood and slowly approached her, circling her chair like a prowling jungle animal.

"My lady deserveth pause from these weighty cares," he murmured gently, coming to rest his
cheek against her own.

Heri sighed softly, eyes falling half-mast, leaning against the surprisingly comfortable shoulder
available to her.

"When was the last time ye had the chance to simply relax? Too long ago, I should think. Far
longer than what is healthy for mortal of your age.

"The world can wait, mistress," he all but whispered in her ear, his warm breath tickling the skin
there. "... just forget them."

Heri's resolved blazed back up.

"NO," she thundered, bolting to her feet. "They can not wait. No matter the circumstances, I
can not put off my task. I must see it finished at once!"

Namtar's expression immediately soured.

"I should have known better than to insinuate my lady should put off the undertaking she vieweth
as her sacred duty," he grumbled to himself, utterly put out.

She scowled at him, crossing her arms.

"What's with this Devil's-advocate bit?" she demanded. "What could you possibly benefit from
keeping me here?"

Namtar looked at her with an expression of frustration, incredulity, amusement, and fondness.

"I would have thought I have made my intentions perfectly clear by this point."

When Heri simply stood there, making no reply, he sighed and then bowed deeply, dropping
down to one knee as he done one before and bending his neck.

"Forgive this servant his insolence," he implored. "'Twas not my place to attempt to sway my
lady one way or another. Should ye wish to leave this plane, I shall readily guide you back."

Heri eyeballed him for a minute before eventually deciding to let it go.

As she turned to walk back the way she came, once more did her eyes settle on the thing
suffering by itself under that chair, still the most pitiful sight she'd ever seen. Even now knowing exactly what
it was, she still couldn't help but feel bad for it.

"Pity it not, my lady, it be as good as dead," Namtar told her, looking down his nose at it, leading
her forward. "Pity those that yet live in the suffering wrought by the creation of things such as it."

"This is what he's done to himself," said Heri, realising the full scope of Tom Riddle's madness.
"He did this to himself — on purpose. No wonder he doesn't even blink at what he does to others."

"By returning, ye will ensure that fewer souls shall be torn apart in this accursed conflict brought
on by mortal ambition," Namtar acknowledged grudgingly. He then sighed again. "An that seemeth
to you a worthy goal, then we shall bid farewell for the present."

Heri nodded and — for whatever whim that struck her — reached out at grabbed Namtar's hand. It was large and hard, distinctly inhuman in texture, no softness to it . . . but it was unpleasant — not at all.

Namtar startled at the touch, staring down at the hand in his as if he had never seen such a thing before. Cautiously, as if afraid to even dare, he gripped her back.

"One of my dearest friends died today so that I could live on and do what I must," Heri told him quietly, observing how their fingers interlocked. In this place, she was separate from her sorrows, but she felt the pull of them. "It would be dishonouring her to linger longer that I absolutely must."

Namtar almost made a face.

"I remember this 'dear friend' of yours," he said, a touch sarcastic. "Was she not the same one that accused you baselessly and discarded your friendship like so much rubbish?"

Heri dug her fingernails into the meat of his palm in reproof, but it was unlikely he even felt it. He obligingly ducked his head though.

"It is human nature to make mistakes and get carried away by powerful emotions. Megan Jones was never a bad person no matter what faults she had. She was cheerful, friendly, easy to talk to, and loved her friends and family whole-heartedly. It was that love that made her lash out at the only one she thought she could act against in her family's defence. She was wrong, but she was a child, and they are allowed to be wrong. Her mistakes do not make her sacrifices any less valid or worthy."

Namtar said nothing to that, he merely tightened his hold on her hand.

Emboldened, Heri leaned in and wrapped her arms around his middle, resting her head against the edge of his sternum. He was so much taller than her, so much wider as well despite appearing lanky and thin — as his arms carefully came up around her as well, she felt safer than she had ever felt before.

What a laugh — safe in the arms of Death.

"Be well, mistress," he breathed. "May their lives be worth your pains."

And everything went black.

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Heri Potter was lying face-down in the dirt — this was the first coherent thought of Cordelia Gifford, junior member of the Order of the Phoenix. The smell of the forest filled her flared nostrils, the tender scent of greenery incongruent with the horror of what she was seeing.

The cold, hard ground dug chafed against her injuries as she struggled futilely against her bonds, but it was nothing next to the ache in her chest — a clawing, scrabbling pain — at seeing Heri Potter crumpled where she fell when the Killing Curse struck her. Despite Cordelia shrieking through the gag in her mouth, screaming and pleading, Miss Potter did not stir but remained exactly where she had fallen, with her left arm bent out at an awkward angle and her mouth ajar.

No! No! This couldn't be happening! She couldn't be —!

But there she was, unmoving.
Through her sobbing, Cordelia wondered why everyone else was so quiet. Wasn't this exactly what they wanted? She would have expected to hear cheers of triumph and jubilation at Miss Potter's death, but, instead, there were only murmurs and whispers.

"My lord . . . my lord . . ."

It was that evil Bellatrix Lestrange woman, and she spoke as if to a lover. Cordelia looked up to see what was going on, and she saw that several Death Eaters were surrounding Lestrange, who was kneeling beside . . . You-Know-Who?

"My lord . . ." Lestrange said again.

"That will do," came You-Know-Who's chilling voice.

In a rush, all the crowding Death Eaters back away, bowing and scraping as they went, returning to the crowd lining the clearing. Bellatrix alone remained behind, still kneeling there as You-Know-Who got to his feet.

Cordelia looked on confusedly, tears streaming down her face, trying to understand what she was seeing. The Death Eaters had been huddled around Voldemort, who seemed to have fallen to the ground. Had something had happened when he had hit Miss Potter with the Killing Curse? Had the Dark Lord collapsed too?

"My lord, let me —"

"I do not require assistance," he said coldly, spurning the hand Lestrange had extended to him. "The girl . . . Is she dead?"

There was complete silence in the clearing. Nobody dared even to breathe too deeply, uncertain what their best course of action would be.

"You," said the Dark Lord, and then there was a wand pointed at Cordelia, and she gave a yelp of pain.

Cordelia's binds fell away from her and her gag disappeared into nothingness.

You-Know-Who sent her a flat stare from over the line of his wand.

"Examine her, woman. Tell me whether she is dead."

Nothing else to do with Death Eaters surrounding her and the Dark Lord himself pointing his wand at her, Cordelia climbed to her feet and shambled forward toward the body of Heri Potter like a harnessed Inferius. Every step was weight, dragging her shoulders down and bending her back. Tears streamed steadily down her face.

She had failed. They had all failed.

Dropping to her knees, Cordelia couldn't help but noticed how small the body was, how terribly tiny the girl they had pressed so many cares on was. How could she be so small? She seemed bigger than all of them in life.

Reaching out, she touched Miss Potter's cheek — soft, smooth, just a child's skin — noting the lack of warmth in the flesh. Hands shaking, she pulled back an eyelid, but, truth be told, she didn't know exactly what she was doing — Cordelia had never checked-over a body before. Not knowing what else to do, her hand crept along Miss Potter's face, down to her bird-like neck, and rested in a
loose choke-hold against where her pulse should have been.

Cordelia was so gone into her misery, she nearly missed —

There. A pulse. Faint though it was.

Hery Potter was still alive.

Thinking quickly, Cordelia bent herself in half over Miss Potter as if overcome and sobbed harshly. Tears — though now in relief and elation — sprung anew to her eyes.

"She — she's dead!" Cordelia wailed, body quaking, chest heaving.

And now the shouted, now they yelled in triumph and stamped their feet, and behind her, Cordelia heard them shoot noisy spells into the air in celebration.

Still feigning despair on the ground, she knew what she had to do. The only way she would be permitted to return to Hogwarts and somehow get Miss Potter to safety again was as prisoner and pall-bearer of the conquering army.

"You see?" gloated You-Know-Who over the tumult. "Herakles Potter is dead by my hand, and no man or woman alive can threaten me now! Watch! Crucio!"

Cordelia had been half expecting it, she knew Miss Potter's body would not be allowed to remain unsullied upon the forest floor; it must be subjected to humiliation to prove the Dark Lord's victory. Still, she couldn't contain the shriek when Miss Potter was lifted into the air, and it took all her determination not to react in a telling way, despite her panic that the ruse would be over before it even began.

But Miss Potter did not react to the pain. Impossibly, she gave nary a twitch despite Cordelia knowing that being unconscious was not a detriment from the Cruciatus. Miss Potter was thrown once, twice, three times into the air — she remained slack and lifeless, and when she fell to the ground for the last time, the clearing echoed with jeers and shrieks of laughter.

"Now," said You-Know-Who, "we go to the castle and show them what has become of their hero. Who shall drag the body? No — Wait —"

There was a fresh outbreak of laughter, and suddenly Cordelia was jerked back from her position by a harsh spell pulling her up again.

"You carry her," You-Know-Who commanded, a terrifying grin on his face. "It shall be poetic, will it not? Pick up your little hero, woman. And pull back her hair — she must be recognisable —"

A nearby Death Eater yanked Miss Potter's hair away from her face with deliberate force, but she did not react to that either. With careful gentleness, Cordelia scooped up their Chosen One, marvelling at how light she was. Still, Cordelia played her part, arms trembling with the force of her heaving sobs, great tears splashing down upon Miss Potter's face as Cordelia cradled her as best as she could.

This was the one who brought down the Dark Lord when no more than a baby, and here she was again, alive once more despite taking another Killing Curse.

"Move," barked You-Know-Who, and Cordelia stumbled forward, forcing her way through the close-growing trees, back through the forest.
Branches caught at Miss Potter's hair and robes, but she lay quiescent, her mouth lolling open, her eyes shut. In the gloom of the trees, while Death Eaters crowed and capered all around them, and while Cordelia sobbed blindly, nobody looked to see whether a pulse beat in the exposed neck of Herakles Potter . . . .

The two giants crashed along behind the Death Eaters; trees creaking and falling as they passed; they made so much din that birds rose shrieking into the sky, and even the jeers of the Death Eaters were drowned. The victorious procession marched on toward the open ground, and after a while, the trees began to thin.

In the brightening light, Cordelia could now see centaurs — at least a full herd of them — creeping forward from the depths of the trees, faces stoic but eyes steady.

A rush of fury flowed through her.

"COWARDS!" she shrieked, nearly dropping Miss Potter with the force of her defamation. "Why didn't you fight?! Too busy hiding away, you arrogant bunch of mules?! Are you happy now? Happy now that she's — d-dead . . . ?"

Cordelia could not continue but broke down in fresh tears. Just the thought once more shook her more than she could bear.

"Out from our forest, humans," said a centaur with a black coat, his pale eyes standing out like fire in the darkness. "We will have no more of you here."

Still high on their elation, the Death Eaters merely called out insults at the centaurs as they left them behind. A little later, they had reached the edge of the forest.

"Stop."

Cordelia lurched a little at the sudden command. A chill settled over them where they stood, and she heard the rasping breath of the dementors as they patrolled the outer trees above the procession.

The Dark Lord stood proudly at the head of the triumphant band, his head held high. Cordelia could see the outline of the horrible grin still on his face as he lifted his wand to his throat, his snake — once contained within its magic cage — now wrapped around his shoulders. A moment later, his voice magnified so that it swelled through the grounds, crashing upon Cordelia's eardrums.

"Herakles Potter is dead. She was killed as she ran away, trying to save herself while you lay down your lives for her."

Cordelia wanted to screech her protests at such an awful lie! Miss Potter had walked in calmly, faced You-Know-Who with nary a twitch, and faced down a Killing Curse again without hesitation!

"We bring you her body as proof that your hero is gone," the Dark Lord continued.

"The battle is won. You have lost half of your fighters. My Death Eaters outnumber you, and the Girl Who Lived is finished. There must be no more war. Anyone who continues to resist, man, woman, or child, will be slaughtered, as will every member of their family. Come out of the castle now, kneel before me, and you shall be spared. Your parents and children, your brothers and sisters will live and be forgiven, and you will join me in the new world we shall build together."

There was silence in the grounds and from the castle.

"Come," said You-Know-Who, and Cordelia was forced to follow once more.
Eventually, they came to a halt once more: Cordelia watched as they spread out in a line facing the open front doors of the school, the light of the entrance hall streaming out onto them and illuminating them in the twilight gloom.

She waited. Any moment, people would come out, and they would see Heri Potter lying apparently dead in Cordelia's arms. She would need to act quickly when the opportunity came to here.

"NO!"

The scream was the more terrible because Cordelia had never expected or dreamed Minerva McGonagall could make such a sound. There was also wailing from Hagrid, and she heard Professor Sprout's distinct sobbing as well. Headmaster Dumbledore betrayed not a tear, but he looked older that Cordelia had ever seen him. Nearby, she heard Lestrange laughing, glorying in the despair.

Cordelia looked on as the open doorway filled with people, the survivors of the battle coming out onto the front steps to face their vanquishers and see the truth of Heri's death for themselves. She saw Voldemort standing a little in front of her, stroking his snake's head with a single white finger. She closed her eyes again in preparation.

"No!"

"No!"

"Heri! HERI!"

The voices of Miss Potter's friends were even worse than the professors; Cordelia wanted nothing more than to call back, to reassure them of the truth, but she she held her tongue. Their cries acted like a trigger; the crowd of survivors took up the cause, screaming and yelling abuse at the Death Eaters, until —

"SILENCE!" cried the Dark Lord, and there was a bang and a flash of bright light, and silence was forced upon them all. "It is over! Set her down, woman — at my feet, where she belongs!"

Cordelia could only obey, lowering Miss Potter onto the grass, desperately trying to think of how she could get them away.

"You see?" he taunted, striding backwards and forward right beside the place where Cordelia was crouched over the younger woman. "Herakles Potter is dead! Do you understand now, deluded ones? She was nothing, ever, but a self-important girl who relied on others to sacrifice themselves for her!"

"She beat you!" bellowed brown-haired Hufflepuff boy, and the charm broke, and the defenders of Hogwarts were shouting and screaming again until a second, more powerful bang extinguished their voices once more.

"She was killed while trying to sneak out of the castle grounds," You-Know-Who told them, and there was relish in his voice for the lie, "killed while trying to save herself —"

But he broke off. With a shout, someone had broken free of the crowd and was charging at the Dark Lord, murder in his eyes. He got barely halfway between the two opposing crowds when he was brought down in a flash of light, landing with a grunt of pain, now Disarmed.

You-Know-Who threw the challenger's wand aside, laughing.
"And who is this?" he said in his soft snake's hiss. "Who has volunteered to demonstrate what happens to those who continue to fight when the battle is lost?"

Lestrange gave a delighted laugh.

"It is Neville Longbottom, my lord! The son of the Aurors, remember?"

"Ah, yes, I remember," said the demon of a man, looking down at Longbottom, who was struggling back to his feet, unarmed and unprotected, standing in the no-man's-land between the survivors and the Death Eaters. "You are a pureblood, aren't you, my brave boy?" he asked the trembling teenager, who stood facing him, his empty hands curled in fists.

"So what if I am?" Longbottom demanded loudly, hatred written on every line of his face.

"You show spirit and bravery, and you come of noble stock. You will make a very valuable Death Eater. We need your kind, Neville Longbottom."

"I'll join you when Hell freezes over," the boy snarled. "Potter's Army!" he shouted, and there was an answering cheer from the crowd, whom You-Know-Who's Silencing Charms seemed unable to hold.

"Very well," said the Dark Lord, and Cordelia heard more danger in the silkiness of his voice than in the most powerful curse. "If that is your choice, Longbottom, we revert to the original plan. On your head," he said quietly, "be it."

Cordelia saw the Dark Lord wave his wand. Seconds later, out of one of the castle's shattered windows, something that looked like a misshapen bird flew through the half light and landed in his hand. He shook the mildewed object by its pointed end and it dangled, empty and ragged: the Sorting Hat.

"There will be no more Sorting at Hogwarts School," said You-Know-Who. "There will be no more Houses. The emblem, shield, and colours of my noble ancestor, Salazar Slytherin, will suffice for everyone. Won't they, Neville Longbottom?"

He pointed his wand at Longbottom, who grew rigid and still, then forced the hat onto the boy's head, so that it slipped down below his eyes. There were movements from the watching crowd in front of the castle, and as one, the Death Eaters raised their wands, holding the fighters of Hogwarts at bay.

"Mr Longbottom here is now going to demonstrate what happens to anyone foolish enough to continue to oppose me," said You-Know-Who, readying his wand once more, but then he paused, looking back towards the angry and scared crowd. "No words of wisdom for us, Dumbledore?" he sneered at the headmaster.

Professor Dumbledore observed their foe gravely.

"Would any wisdom reach you now, Tom?" he asked sadly.

The Dark Lord snarled, and with a flick of his wand, he caused the Sorting Hat to burst into flames.

Screams split the evening, and Longbottom was aflame, rooted to the spot, unable to move, and Cordelia couldn't do anything! She could only heave up Miss Potter and —!

And then many things happened at the same moment.
They heard an uproar from the distant boundary of the school as what sounded like hundreds of people came swarming over the out-of-sight walls and pelted toward the castle, uttering loud war cries.

At the same time, what looked like a juvenile giant came lumbering around the side of the castle and yelled, "HAGGER!"

His cry was answered by roars from Voldemort's giants, who ran at the newcomer like bull erumpents, making the earth quake.

Then came hooves and the twangs of bows, and arrows were suddenly falling amongst the Death Eaters, who broke ranks, shouting their surprise. The centaurs were attacking, green-skinned women on their backs who were wielding swords.

If that wasn't enough, a giant bird the size of a griffin swooped down from the towers, what looked like a small child in its talons. The child was dropped from quite high but paid no mind to whatever damage she might have taken and leapt onto Cordelia, yanking Miss Potter's from her hands. Before anyone could do more than screech, the child — ignoring how Cordelia was trying to pull her off — thrust a small bottle of some kind under the young godborn's nose, and then —!

But at the same time, in one swift, fluid motion, Longbottom broke free of the Body-Bind Curse upon him; the flaming hat fell off him and he drew from its depths something silver, with a glittering, rubied handle —

The slash of the silver blade could not be heard over the roar of the oncoming crowd or the sounds of the clashing giants or of the stampeding centaurs, and yet it seemed to draw every eye. With a single stroke Longbottom sliced off the great snake's head, which spun high into the air, gleaming in the light flooding from the entrance hall, and the Dark Lord's mouth was open in a scream of fury that nobody could hear, and the snake's body thudded to the ground at his feet, a foul mist rising up from its remains —

And then Heri Potter was up, standing in front of the strange vapour, and she seemed to take a bite out of it before it completely dissipated —

"SHE'S ALIVE!"

— and then Cordelia Gifford, junior member of the Order of the Phoenix, was shot in the back, cut down by an unknown spell. Wheezing in pain, her blood boiling in her veins, she couldn't help but be relieved that she'd managed to do at least one thing right by the one who would defeat the Dark Lord.

Chaos reigned. The charging centaurs were scattering the Death Eaters, everyone was fleeing the giants' stamping feet, and nearer and nearer thundered the reinforcements that had come from who knew where; there were great winged creatures soaring around the heads of Voldemort's giants, thestrals and hippogriffs and a monstrous-sized Hedwig scratching at their eyes while Hagrid and Grawp punched and pummelled them; and now the wizards, defenders of Hogwarts and Death Eaters alike, were being forced back into the castle, out of the way of the battling Creatures.

Hidden under her Cloak once more, Heri was shooting jinxes and curses at any Death Eater she could see, and they crumpled, not knowing what or who had hit them, and their bodies were trampled by the retreating crowd.

Heri was buffeted along into the entrance hall: She was searching for Voldemort and saw him
across the room, firing spells from his wand as he backed into the Great Hall, still screaming instructions to his followers as he sent curses flying left and right; Heri cast Shield Charms, and Voldemort's would-be victims — Seamus Finnigan and Susan Bones — darted past her into the Great Hall, where they joined the fight already flourishing inside it.

And now there were more, even more people storming up the front steps, and Heri saw Charlie Weasley overtaking Horace Slughorn, who was still wearing his emerald pyjamas. They seemed to have returned at the head of what looked like the families and friends of every Hogwarts student who had remained to fight, along with the shopkeepers and homeowners of Hogsmeade, more members of the Order, and Auror reinforcements. The centaurs with Bane, Ronan, and Magorian at the lead — Celandine's nymphs astride them — burst into the hall with a great clatter of hooves, as behind Heri the door that led to the kitchens was blasted off its hinges.

The house-elves of Hogwarts swarmed into the entrance hall, screaming and waving carving knives and cleavers, and at their head were Oona and Dobby, their screeches audible over the din: "Fight! Fight! Fight for Miss Heri! Fight the Dark Lord, in the name of our lost masters! Fight!"

They were hacking and stabbing at the ankles and shins of Death Eaters, their tiny faces alive with malice, and everywhere Heri looked Death Eaters were folding under sheer weight of numbers, overcome by spells, dragging arrows from wounds, stabbed in the leg by elves, or else simply attempting to escape, but swallowed by the oncoming horde.

From different corners of the entrance hall and echoing out from the Great Hall as well, Heri heard war cries from her fellow godborns, untaught as they were in battle-arms, fighting with their chosen weapons as well as with their wands. Not a one of them dared to invoke their parents against their unendowed enemies, but —

"O Lady Herakles, my chosen patron, I offer this death to thee!" bellowed Zacharias, slashing Death Eater grunt across the back of his neck.

"For Lady Herakles, martyr of martyrs!" Ernie called, ducking under a curse and stabbing his opponent in the gut with a bladed staff. "May these fallen souls find their due with her!"

— With every dedication exalted in her name, Heri felt just that bit bigger, just that little touch more aware.

But it was not over yet — Heri sped between duellists, past struggling prisoners, and into the Great Hall.

Voldemort was in the centre of the battle, and he was striking and smiting all within reach. Heri could not get a clear shot, but fought her way nearer, still invisible, and the Great Hall became more and more crowded as everyone who could walk forced their way inside.

Heri saw Yaxley slammed to the floor by the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan; saw Dolohov fall with a scream at Professor Flitwick's hands; saw Walden Macnair thrown across the room by Hagrid, hit the stone wall opposite, and slide unconscious to the ground. She saw Ron, Hermione, and Lavender bringing down Fenrir Greyback; the headmaster's brother Stunning Rookwood; and Mr. Weasley and Percy flooring Mulciber.

Voldemort was now duelling Professors Dumbleodore, McGonagall, and Slughorn all at once, and there was cold hatred in his face as they wove and ducked around him, unable to finish him —

Bellatrix was still fighting too, fifty yards away from Voldemort, and like her master she duelled three at once: Hannah, Sally-Anne, and Luna, all battling their hardest, but Bellatrix was equal to
them, and Heri's attention was diverted as a Killing Curse shot so close to Hannah that she missed
death by an only inch —

Heri changed course, running at Bellatrix rather than Voldemort, but someone bulldozed past her,
knocking her aside.

"DON'T YOU TOUCH THEM, YOU CUNT!"

Bellatrix spun on the spot, roaring with laughter at the sight of her new challenger.

"OUT OF MY WAY!" shouted Neville to the three girls, and with a swipe of his wand he began
to duel.

Heri watched with terror and awe as Neville's wand slashed and twirled, and Bellatrix Lestrange's
smile faltered and became a snarl. Jets of light flew from both wands, the floor around their feet
became hot and cracked; both were fighting to kill.

"No!" Neville growled as a few other students ran forward, trying to come to his aid. "Get back! She is mine! Focus on the others!"

Hundreds of people now lined the walls, watching the two fights, Voldemort and his three
opponents, Bellatrix and Neville. Heri stood, invisible, torn between both, wanting to attack and yet
to protect, unable to be sure that she would not hit the innocent.

"What will happen to all your widdle friends when I've killed you, Baby Longbottom?" taunted
Bellatrix, as mad as her master, capering as Neville's curses danced around her. "Do you think they
will last as long as you? Maybe I'll go visit your poor mummy and daddy and remind them of the fun
we had together!"

"You will never touch any one of them again!" screamed Neville, snarling like a beast.

Bellatrix laughed, the same exhilarated laugh Heri had often heard Sirius and Tonks give just
before they suffered for their idiocy, and suddenly Heri knew what was going to happen before it
did.

Neville's curse soared beneath Bellatrix's outstretched arm and hit her squarely in the chest,
directly over her heart.

Bellatrix's gloating smile froze, her eyes seemed to bulge: For the tiniest space of time she knew
what had happened, and then she toppled, and the watching crowd roared, and Voldemort screamed.

Heri felt as though she turned in slow motion; she saw the three professors blasted backward,
lying through the air, as Voldemort's fury at the fall of his best lieutenant exploded with the force of
a bomb. Voldemort raised his wand and directed it at Neville.

"PROTEGO HORRIBILIS!" roared Heri, and the Dark magic shield expanded in the middle of
the Hall.

Voldemort scanned the room for the source as Heri pulled off the Invisibility Cloak once more.

The yell of shock, the cheers, the screams on every side of "Heri!" were stifled at once. Silence
fell abruptly and completely as Voldemort and Heri locked eyes, and began, at the same moment, to
circle each other.

"I don't want anyone else to try to help," Heri said softly, but in the total silence her voice carried
like a trumpet call. "It's got to be just us or this won't work."

Voldemort scoffed loudly.

"Potter doesn't mean that," he said, his ruddy eyes wide. "That isn't how she works, is it? Who are you going to use as a shield today, Potter?"

"Nobody," said Heri simply. "It's just you and me. Neither can triumph while the other survives and all that, and one of us is about to leave for good . . . ."

"One of us?" jeered Voldemort, and his whole body was taut and his eyes narrowed, a snake that was about to strike. "You think it will be you, do you? The girl who has survived by accident, and because Dumbledore was pulling the strings?"

"Accident, was it, when my parents died to save me?" asked Heri. They were still moving sideways, both of them, in that perfect circle, maintaining the same distance from each other, and for Heri no face existed but Voldemort's. "Accident, when I ruined your ritual at that graveyard and destroyed your vessel? Accident, that I didn't defend myself tonight, and still survived, and returned to fight again?"

"Accidents!" screeched Voldemort, but still he did not strike, and the watching crowd was frozen as if Petrified, and of the hundreds in the Hall, nobody seemed to breathe but they two. "Accident and chance and the fact that you crouched and snivelled behind the skirts of greater men and women, and permitted me to kill them for you!"

Heri wrinkled her nose, tilting her head.

"Are you talking about me or yourself? You certainly seemed to enjoy sacrificing minions while you escaped our every meeting before."

"You dare —?"

"Yes, I dare," Heri hissed. Her eyes flickered black and she snarled with purposeful malice, "I have tasted your heart, Tom Riddle, and it is now mine." She bared her teeth and snapped at the air like a hungry wolf. "A pity I didn't get more than a bite when poor Nagini met the wrong side of that sword. You should take better care of your soul anchors."

A flash of fear crossed Voldemort's face before he returned to towering fury.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!!"

"I've done quite a few things you've never imagined," Heri said loftily. "And I know things you don't know, Tom Riddle. I know secrets you would salivate at the thought of knowing. Would you like to hear some of the wisdom you asked for earlier, before you make another mistake?"

Voldemort did not speak, but prowled in a circle, and Heri knew that she kept him temporarily mesmerized and at bay, held back by the possibility that Heri might indeed know a some great secret . . . .

"Is it something to do with love again?" said Voldemort, his snake's face leering. "Dumbledore's favourite solution, love, which he claims conquered death, though love did nothing to stop his precious student from dying when I tore through his pathetic wards? Love, which did not prevent me stamping out your mudblood mother like a cockroach, Potter — and nobody seems to love you enough to run forward this time and take my curse. So what will stop you dying now when I strike?"
"Oh, just one thing thing really," Heri said airily, and still they circled each other, wrapped in each other. "I suppose it's really no big deal."

"If it is not love that will save you this time," said Voldemort, "then you must believe that you have magic that I do not, or else a weapon more powerful than mine?"

"I'd say a little both," said Heri, and she saw shock flit across the snakelike face, though it was instantly dispelled; Voldemort began to laugh, and the sound was more frightening than his screams; humourless and insane, it echoed around the silent Hall.

"You think you know more magic than I do?" he jeered. "Than I, than Lord Voldemort, who has performed magic that no one before dreamed of?"

"It's not really a matter of more as it is better," she told him. "Though I have to wonder if you really haven't heard that certain gods has blessed me with their parentage. I'd say divine powers would trump magic on most occasions."

"Gods!" Voldemort spat, sparks flickering at his wandtip. "That is your great secret, Potter? This nonsense about gods? I might have known you would spout more of this drivel in some pathetic attempt to buy yourself time! You and all your other idiotic followers have nothing else to cling to it seems!

"Tell me, girl, where are your gods now? They do not come to your aid! Call for them! Shout louder! After all, they are gods!" he mocked. "Surely, your heavenly father will answer you? Oh, but perhaps he's engaged in some conversation, or maybe he's being detained by another supplicant, turning water into wine! Perhaps he is asleep — maybe he'll wake up for you if you beg long enough!

"He is NOTHING!" Voldemort roared, swinging his wand up at her. "You are nothing — nothing but the deluded child of blood-traitors and filth," he spat. "More Creature than human, I see now — Not divine but a dirty half-breed! There is no god in this world, Potter, and I will make you see that when I rain down the devastation of every demon in the pits of Hell upon the pathetic muggle fools and every last one of you who oppose me until you know your place!

"I will be the highest authority, and you — will — o — obey!"

Voldemort's chest rose and fell rapidly, and Heri could feel the curse building, feel it swelling inside the wand pointed at her face.

"'Heavenly father' you say," she echoed carefully, bringing her wand up as well. "What a strange way of putting it. It's been made very obvious to anyone with any sense in their head that my father resides nowhere near a place anyone would call 'heaven.' In fact, I don't think I've ever heard that term used outside of Judaeo-Christian circles! And you speak of demons as well . . . .

"How very pious of you!"

Héri grin caustically.

"You're Christian, aren't you?" She carried on pleasantly, still matching Voldemort step for step. "I'd say Catholic specifically. Yes, I'm almost completely sure of it — I'd know that sort of self-righteousness anywhere; I was raised up with it myself. Being raised in an orphanage back then would do that I suppose — and poor Wool's would have had to rely on a church to keep them afloat.

"They were very religious back then, weren't they? Aggressively so. No doubt they beat it into you . . . ."
He shot the spell into her face at that, but she bounced it away into the ceiling with a shield.

"It's rude to interrupt," she scolded channelling all the obnoxiousness inside of her. "As I was saying, they probably beat it into you, and likely gave you an especially hard time — They feared the accidental magic, didn't they? Did they call you a demon-child, Riddle? I know they did me."

Heri tilted her head and looked down her nose at him once more.

"And you still to this day you pay credence to the One God they told you about — don't try to tell me you don't. Your mind is still fixed in the paradigm they moulded it into even after how horribly the practitioners that brought you up treated you... How loyal of you! How... brainlessly so... ."

At this point, Voldemort was too enraged to say anything besides —

"Crucio!"

Heri went intangible and allowed the curse to fly right through her, though she did wince when she heard those behind her jumping out of the way.

"Temper, temper," she rebuked, returning to materiality as Voldemort gaped at her. "Touchy subject?"

"What the Hell are you?!" he barked.

"More Creature than human apparently, if we're going by your own words. But my sort usually just call ourselves demigods or godborns."

"THERE ARE NO GODS!" Voldemort exploded, all but frothing like a rabid animal. "NOT OF ANY PANTHEON NOR THE ONE GOD! Your petty insults are nothing, based on utter nonsense you've made up by yourself!"

"If it's only nonsense, then why does it provoke you so?" Heri challenged. "I see you lie to yourself as much as you do to everyone else.

"Is this your revenge, Riddle?" she asked peaceably. "Hm? You go against your God, you deny Him with everything you are... but aren't you just advocating His existence?"

"It's very simple, Riddle: If you didn't believe in your One, you wouldn't lash out at whom you see as His people. And isn't every human in the world His people according to your faith? Muggles, muggleborns, half-bloods and pure-bloods — you don't actually care, do you? You don't care about blood-purity, all you care about is ruling over everyone to prove you're better.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised," Heri sniffed. "You followers of the God of Abraham have always been violent and selfish, haven't you? It's always 'convert to my way or die!' with you lot — there's no middle path for your kind.

"They invaded into other nations, slaughtering their way through every country they could sink their bloody fingers into in the name of holy crusades and converting 'heathens' — And never mind against other religions, the followers of the One killed each other even at the barest notion that some amongst them were not the correct amount or make of reverent. Now doesn't that sound familiar? I can see now that they managed to train what should have been a normal magical child to see with their jaundiced eyes.

"And then you sunk your claws into others, too, didn't you?" she said quietly, confidently. "You
corrupted others and twisted their minds, encouraging out violent bigotry until they were utterly convinced that it was their birthright to kill and torture and anything else to get what they wanted.

"He is still your God even now, isn't He? That's why you hate the thought of godborns so much. So, I ask you in return: Where's your God, Riddle? Where's your Satan and your demons? My gods are here," — Heri thumped her fist against her heart — "and my father is more demon than anything you can conjure into this world."

Voldemort's face was a rictus of fiery wrath.

"It matters not!" he shrieked. "It matters not what you say or think, or what petty obstacles you try to put in my path! I will crush them as I crushed your parents and everyone else that stood in my way!"

He had followed every one of her words with rapt attention, but now he let out a cackle of mad laughter.

"I will destroy you, Herakles Potter," he hissed, panting. "I won't leave enough of you for your foolish friends to mourn over!"

Heri eyed him steadily.

"I see," she said simply, readying herself. "But before you try to kill me, I'd advise you to think about what you've done . . . . Think, and try for some remorse, Riddle . . . ."

"What is this?"

Of all the things that Heri had said to him, beyond any revelation or taunt, nothing had shocked Voldemort like this. Heri saw his pupils contract to thin slits, saw the skin around his eyes whiten.

"It's your one last chance," said Heri. "It's all you've got left . . . . I've seen what you'll be otherwise . . . . I've seen in, Riddle. Be a man . . . try . . . Try for some remorse . . . ."

"You dare —?" said Voldemort again, outrage rising.

"I will always dare!" Heri snapped, her temper flaring. "And I see now that it was folly to try and reason with you! You're nothing but a mad dog too gone to not put down!"

"Enough of this!" he bellowed, launching a blast of violet at her. It was fast enough that she couldn't completely evade it — it smacked into her hip before she could go immaterial.

But it did no good — all Heri felt was spike of pain that just as quickly went away.

Unhindered, she flickered back in again and shouted, "Ardescat!", setting the air around him on fire, baiting him into a proper duel.

Voldemort attacked as ferociously as he always did, now even more furiously so than he did with his three previous opponents, but no matter what he did, nothing stuck. Blow after blow, Heri kept coming, not even trying to evade any more, she took the hits and simply fought through them.

Growing more and more frustrated, Voldemort finally cracked and threw a Killing Curse at her again. There was screams from the watching crowd as she was thrown to the ground, but there were no words to describe the wordless wonderment when she sat up afterwards and rolled back onto her feet, still ready for more.
"Why won't you stay down, Potter?" Voldemort bellowed, trying to pin her with lance of ice.

"Until you're gone from this world," hissed Heri, melting the ice with a blast of heat before it got too close, "I will never stop. You will never be rid of me, Riddle! I will remove your taint no matter what form it takes! And you may still have followers out there, cowards hiding in the shadows, waiting for their chance, but even they will not be safe! They will never know peace in this lifetime! They will SUFFER for all you have done!

"Every monster who happily bears your mark," Heri railed on, working up a good, old-fashioned malediction, "every murderer who fights and kills in your name — may their spells fizzle out, may their weapons miss their mark, may they be just that second too slow! THEY WILL RUE THE DAY THEY SWARE THEMSELVES TO YOU! THEY WILL LIVE EVERY SECOND OF THE PAIN AND AGONY THEY HAVE CAUSED, AND AT THE HANDS OF THOSE THEY HAVE WRONGED!"

"So says the champion of the Light?" Voldemort taunted. "I thought you were 'the Sun'? How Darkly burns Britain's little 'ray of hope'!"

Something inside of her flinched, but just as quickly it was overturned by unwavering resolve.

"I'm not Professor Dumbledore, Riddle," she told him, contempt written on every line of her face. "I am no kindly Lord of Light. I am the light that burns, I am the sun that scorches and destroys. And I will destroy you with all the Light that you scorn and dismiss. For all the lives you've ended for your disgusting ambitions.

"Be thankful though — you will not know the misery your followers will. I will be granting you the mercy of death. And it will be mercy, both for you and for all the people that suffer under you. What can be more Light than that?"

Voldemort growled menacingly.

"Bold words for a child."

"I am a child, aren't I?" She hadn't felt like one in a long time though. "Still I am old enough for this."

And with that, Heri fired a Blasting Hex at him, only to be met with another Killing Curse.

Their spells connected.

The bang was like a cannon blast, sending sound waves shaking the ground. Voldemort's green jet meet her own stream of red, and suddenly Heri's wand was vibrating as though an electric charge were surging through it; her hand seized up around it; she couldn't have released it if she'd wanted to — and a narrow beam of light connected the two wands at the dead centre of the circle they had been treading. It was neither red nor green, but bright, deep gold. Heri, following the beam with her gaze, saw that Voldemort's long white fingers too were gripping a wand that was shaking and vibrating.

The golden thread connecting them splintered; though the wands remained connected, a thousand more beams arced high over Heri and Voldemort, criss-crossing all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a cage of light, beyond which the witness circled frantically.

Heri saw Voldemort's red eyes wide with alarm at what was happening, saw him fighting to break the thread of light still connecting his wand with hers; she held onto her wand more tightly,
with both hands, and the golden thread remained unbroken.

And then an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air . . . . It was coming from every thread of the light-spun web vibrating around them. It was a sound Heri recognised, though she had heard it only once before in her life: phoenix song. It was the most beautiful and welcome thing she had ever heard in her life . . . . She felt as though the song were inside her instead of just around her . . . . it was almost as though a friend were speaking in her ear . . . .

Don't break the connection.

I know, Harry told the music, thoughts sluggish, but still certain. I know I mustn't . . .

But no sooner had she thought it that the thing became much harder to do. Her wand began to vibrate more powerfully than ever . . . and now the beam between her and Voldemort changed too — it was as though large beads of light were sliding up and down the thread connecting the wands.

Heri felt her wand give a shudder under her hand as the light beads began to slide slowly and steadily her way . . . . The direction of the beam's movement was now toward her, from Voldemort, and she felt his wand shudder angrily . . . .

As the closest bead of light moved nearer to Heri's wandtip, the wood beneath her fingers grew so hot, she feared it would burst into flame. The closer that bead moved, the harder Heri's wand vibrated; she was then utterly certain that her wand would not survive contact with it; it felt as though it was about to shatter under her fingers —

In a blaze of blue fire, Heri's wand exploded out, sending flaming shards through the air, some splinters lodging themselves into the flesh of her hand. With it, the golden cage dissipated.

And yet the connection between them remained unbroken. Heri now held onto the magic with her bare hand, channelling through her arm instead.

This was it, she realised, her thoughts clear once more. Heri could feel the pressure inside her swell, that spark inside of her that she now knew to be her touch of divinity was pushing out against her flimsy mortality. As it built and built, she felt herself . . . leaking? She could feel liquid streaming from her eyes and nose, even trickling from her ears.

A trail of the fluid dripped into her mouth, and Heri tasted a familiar copper tang.

Ah, she was bleeding. She really was falling apart. Still, this was no combustion, merely self-destruction. She needed a little more, just something to —

"The — the ring!" Heri suddenly croaked out, remembering. "N-Neville!" she called, still not daring to turn her head. "Take my ring from me!"

"Your ring?" she heard her friend parrot from off to her side, utterly bewildered and terrified. "But —?"

"Yes! Take it!" she shouted. "take it and — and close your eyes! Close your eyes and look away! Everyone must look away!"

"Why?!" he cried, panicking. "What are you doing?!"

Heri was on the verge of frustrated tears.

"Just do it, Neville! Please."
"Turn around!" Neville suddenly hollered, startling the onlookers with his aggression. "Heri said look away! Do it now!"

"Miss Potter and Mr Longbottom are correct!" Professor called out as well, finally breaking his long stretch of silence. "Look away at once! This is for your own safety!"

"What's this?" Voldemort then demanded, caught within the connection, utterly irate, and now just as furiously confused. "After all your words . . . are you giving up?"

"Giving up?" said Heri She shook her head. "No. This is the furthest thing from giving up. This is me putting my friends first — because I love them."

"Love," Voldemort spat, eyes blazing and features twisted by revulsion. Heri actually huffed in a weak laugh at how bitterly he uttered the word.

"Yes, love," she affirmed. "It's not easy for those like us, is it? There's something in us that's not whole enough for it. You can't manage it at all — and I can only work up only a trickle of what they deserve from me. But you know how powerful a motivator it can be . . . and I still have enough in me to do this properly."

In a rush of motion, Heri's back burst outward into eight full tenacula, all clawed, lined with barbed suction discs, and bristling with savage quills, shredding through her robes to get out. These appendages lunged at Voldemort and wrapped around him painfully, quite literally pinning him in place beyond the golden connection, spikes piercing him, spines sinking into him.

"Rest assured, this is no 'Power of Friendship' or whatever it is that you so despise," she said over his screams of pain, eyes going black once more. "You might even call it Dark magic if you want — sacrifice. I sacrifice blood and flesh. I sacrifice life and soul. I will die so they may live."

"And I will be taking you with me."

Now sure enough in herself, Heri turned to see several witnesses still watching despite all previous warnings, too transfixed to heed the instructions.

"You prayed to me even when I had no means of answering those prayers," said Heri gently but purposefully around the blood now leaking from her mouth as well. "I have the means now, and I intend on answering them. Look away now — this is not meant for your eyes."

Hesitantly, eyes were diverted as commanded and there were even those who turned to face the opposite direction.

Heri's sights then moved to Neville, standing at her elbow and looking like his world was ending.

"I need . . . just a little more," she breathed. "I can feel it — just a bit . . . Will you . . . will you give me one more prayer?"

Shuddering, he nodded.

"O Lady Herakles . . ." he began, lips quivering. "I call to you. Good goddess I hold above all others, child of He Who Devours, she who is martyred so that we live free. You are beloved in our sights, for you are the Sun, the break of day, from which all darkness flees. I honour you, good lady, for you are just. I offer you my praise and pray you bless us again."

The words were practised and familiar, rolling off Neville's tongue as if he had said them a
hundred time before. Maybe he had. But they were just what she needed, and she felt stretched and bloated, swollen — her skin constricted and crackled, splintering and oozing forth more blood and some golden fluid.

"N-now you too, Neville," Heri instructed, trying to hold herself together a bit longer. Her fondness spilled onto her face. "Believe in me one last time . . . . Close your eyes . . . and look away."

Troubled expression twisting his visage, Neville bowed his head did as she said, shutting his eyes and then —

He ripped the Resurrection Stone from her hand.

Heri shuddered and groaned, feeling her insides decaying, liquidating. Anyone still stupidly watching would have see lines of black poison crawling up her neck, splitting open across skin like shattering glass. Her breath came in wheezes as she felt herself quite literally tearing apart at the seams.

"WHAT IS THIS?" Voldemort demanded once more, struggling against the iron grasp he was held in.

Heri finally broke the connection between their magic, but by that point, it was too late for Voldemort to get away.

Trembling to remain upright, she gave Riddle one last bloody grin. Her face began to disintegrate at the sudden motion, falling as dust to the floor. The stone floor underneath her splintered and crumbled under a force that was just now becoming visible. From every fissure in her failing body, Heri was leaking unearthly light.

"I don't know about Hell, but I'll see you in Irkalla where my father reigns."

Heralded by the sound of shattering glass, Heri Potter was unmade.

The entity of death known as Namtar looked on as the soul of his mistress — the soul known in life as Herakles Potter — detached itself from that remains of its physical vessel and fully material within the Void, the space between the mortal realm and the recesses found beyond the Veil.

"They told me it wouldn't hurt."

These words, while quiet, were still thunderously loud in the stark silence of the vast nothingness.

"Succumbing to death?" Namtar responded, scooping up the globe of light that was his mistress. He cradled her to his chest. "Nay, it ne'er be so. But oft 'tis the dying that the victims find agony in."

She pulsed her light contemplatively.

"I never really thought about it, but dying is a part of life, isn't it? Nothing can die if it's already dead."

Namtar nodded though she no longer had eyes to see with nor was she still dependant on that limited human sense that was sight.

"Just so," he murmured. "My lady begineth to understand wherefore sprung my mystification that ye desired to linger in life longer than required of you, especially in the state ye were in. I wonder
what torment it must be to be **half** so for any amount of time . . . ."

His mistress flickered in the rough equivalent of a shrug.

"In some ways its no bother at all, since you can't feel it — can't feel anything really. Not any more. Not even coldness. Just numbness—? No. When you're numb, you can tell you're supposed to be feeling something. But you *can't* tell — you don't even realise it. You're just empty."

She sighed.

"In other ways it's the worst, because you get so **tired**, and you just want to **rest**, but you *can't* rest — that's part of what's missing! You're always just **there** — **always**! You're not **supposed** to be there, but you're just **there** — un**ending** — un**blinking** — un**moving**—!

She broke off when her voice caught, out of air despite neither using any nor needing any any longer.

"I didn't know how much I was missing — not until just now. I was so **cold**, freezing really, but didn't know I was cold, because I didn't remember what warm was like. I'd been falling apart far earlier than I realised. I don't think I can pinpoint exactly when I was still perfectly whole."

She exhaled a low, weary sigh.

"I'm so tired of being **half** of anything."

And with that Namtar carried the soul of Heri Potter through the Veil.

In her last thoughts, she rued that she had never met her other mother.

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**End of Hogwarts Arc**

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**Chapter End Notes**

**PLEASE READ THIS:**

An insightful reviewer, Tempest S, commented a few chapters back, "for a man Heri wanted to marry from the moment she saw him, I don't feel like Marcus got nearly the attention he should have," and that I "dropped him before anything could really get going."

To this I would like say yes, you've hit upon something I thought no one would really care enough to notice. This makes me happy because it shows that my readers are intelligent and look beyond the surface impression.

Tempest S, you are absolutely correct that Marcus has not gotten enough screen time to be considered a proper love-interest. This is because he was never meant to be.

I have always believed things that make a character come to life — like their personal
relationships — should be made as true-to-life as possible. When we factor in Heri's circumstances, her duties, her goals, her personality, and the actual physical distance between her and Marcus, there was never any way to realistically forge a romantic relationship between them that would last beyond his graduation, if at all. Quite plainly, I could not include true romance without completely abandoning the plot.

In every chapter, there has been something for Heri to achieve, something she has to do or else she and/or the people around her will suffer. You might have noticed that her interactions with other people are often very vaguely put and usually worded as an afterthought when it's in Heri's POV; on top of such things detracting from the pace of the story, this is because that is how Heri sees the world. She feels things for others, but they're always so far away from her, lacking that sense of closeness on her part. She can't invest the same amount of intimacy with people.

Marcus was introduced to represent an ideal, a dream of a future and a happy loving life that Heri could desperately want but had to hold back from. With every potential suitor introduced — Marcus, Neville, Viktor (Hell, even Wayne and Cormac McLaggen) — that was another and another possible happy ending that Heri had to let go of if she was to accomplish what she must. How could she indulge in a boyfriend when there were people dying and looking to her to save them? You might have noticed that I even put her aspirations of what she would do after Hogwarts as an off-note just before she learned of the prophecy. That was because her dreams of love and hopes for the future had no true place on the path of a girl walking purposefully and intently towards her death.

Heri won't be marrying Marcus or Viktor or anyone else. Heri won't be getting her Masteries despite how hard she's worked at it. Heri won't ever be graduating from Hogwarts. Heri is never going to grow-up.

Heri Potter has always been the last hope of other people — there was never time for her to act on her own. To quote a song that often comes to mind as I write this story:

I was thinkin' about you; thinkin' about me/
thinkin' about us. What we gonna be?/
I opened my eyes. It was only just a dream.
Dear Luke,

If you're reading this, then I'm already dead.

I don't know how else to put it, or how else to word it to make it less than the unpleasant fact that it is — this is my fifth time writing this letter, and every earlier attempt /a line of words completely indecipherable, jaggedly scratched out/

Well, they didn't work, and I'm tired of writing the same things over and over only to throw my efforts away, so this will be my final draft, no matter how inarticulate it ends up. You'll just have to forgive how choppy and poorly written this might come across.

Yes, I'm dead. Sorry if that's inconvenient or whatever, and sorry if this is coming off as blasé, but that's the long and short of it, and I don't want to be all condescendingly tiptoeing around it as if you don't already know very well about the reality of people dying unfairly.

No, I didn't die in a monster attack, if that's what you're thinking — it would be damned ridiculously over-prepared of me if I prepared a letter like this just in case of that, wouldn't it? The truth is that /speckles of ink in a too big gap between words/ there's quite a bit more to me than being a demigod and all the hellish rubbish being one entails, and while it's probably illegal of me to tell you of what exactly I'm talking about (I'm pretty certain it's illegal since you're still technically a normal person even though you're semidieous), I'll be dead by the time you're informed, so I'd like to see the Ministry just try to persecute me for it.

I don't want to bore you with the details, but I was born a wizard — or a witch if you want to be gender-specific, but that designation is only really used in English-speaking Europe and not in the Americas, since the meaning of 'witch' is different in the States, referring to a completely separate kind of magic-user /a smeared blot of ink/ But differing definitions aside, yeah, I'm a wizard, sorceress — whatever it is that you would call someone who waves a wand, brews potions, flies on a broomstick, and all that. We're not the children of gods of magic either (though some of us certainly can be), we're a proper human-adjacent species — or maybe it's a sub-species? I'm not sure of what the proper terms for it would be, but I do know that while Muggles (our word for non-magical people) are 'Homo sapiens sapiens', wizards are 'Homo sapiens potens'.

But that's not really important. I don't even know if you attended formal schooling long enough to even know what I'm on about.

Sorry, I'm sort of just rambling about nothing, aren't I? It's just that there are so many things I wish I had time to tell you, things I wish I could share with you, but there's not going to be time for it, and I don't know if we would have ever had the chance for it anyway.

But never mind all that — the gist: magic is real and wizards exist, me being amongst those numbers. There's quite a few of us in the world, and at the moment we're having quite a bit of trouble with a terrorist revolutionary group trying to kill off all the 'impure' (those of us with non-magical ancestry). And I'm one of those 'impure' — my mortal mother was a witch born to normal muggle parents. The maniac and his followers also have a grudge against me for reasons you don't really need to know, and, wel /a strange scuff/
But you don't need to worry about any of that.

Sorry for vomiting information on you out of left field, but this has sort of been the entirety of my reality for a while, and it's hard to not let it slip into unaffected parts of my life. Main point: some absolute bullocks is happening on my end and it has to do in part because I'm a wizard. You don't even really need to know that I'm a wizard, now that I think about it, but I want you to have some context, and it likely would have been an incomprehensible explanation without magic being introduced.

Since you're reading this, that means I was either offed unexpectedly and now /another line scratched out/ No, I'm not even going to put that possibility out there. My most likely cause of death will be purposeful and deliberate suicide, and no, I've never been depressed, but there's something inside me that's keeping the enemy alive, and to kill him I have to die first. He'll be properly killable again after, so it's a matter of landing a hit on him after the fact, and there are plenty of competent people to do so. It's all been planned out for nearly a year now from the point of me writing this, so it's just of matter of executing it in full. (No pun intended.)

What I'm saying here is that by the time you're reading this, everything will already be resolved one way or another, so there's nothing you need to fret about, and you're definitely not in danger from this end — this is just a notice to let you know why I won't be writing any longer.

But just because I'll be gone doesn't mean I'll be leaving you out on your own. Bramblewood Hall is still open to you at any time you want — I've made sure of it. I can't actually bequeath it to you outright since the bank doesn't recognise Muggles as valid inheritors to wizarding assets, but I made it a condition in my Will that Bramblewood Hall is to be in Fisken's care, and he's readily agreed to host you and anyone else you bring along with you for as long as you may need.

Fisken is my 'invisible servant' by the way. It was just one of him at Bramblewood Hall the first time actually, but I don't doubt that his wife and he have had some children by now, so don't worry about it being a lot of work for them, their species thrive off of work — think like the elves from The Shoemaker and the Elves.

The notice-me-not ear-stud might lose some strength after I die, but if that happens you can ask Fisken to get it re-enforced by an enchanter. (And don't worry about what that might cost, because things like that will be covered by the monthly allowance I've put into trust for the upkeep of Bramblewood Hall.) It shouldn't take more than a day, and you can stay in the Hall during the wait. I've also enclosed a chain-mail I've tinkered with — it's enchanted to cushion blows and will grow and shrink to whoever is wearing it.

I know the ring I made you before is all but useless at this point, but maybe you could keep it just in case you come across another baby godborn in the wild that could use it? But if you don't want to hang onto it, please just give it to Fisken, don't toss it out just anywhere — my kind are horrendously stringent about not having Muggles know about magic, the Americans especially, and if they find the ring they can trace it back to you and wipe your memories. PLEASE be careful with those things, if only for your own safety.

Um, there's not much else to say at this point. If it doesn't put you out, could you check in on Allie every once in a while? His 'guard' is still perfectly functional, but I don't want him to feel lonely. And maybe you could give him the notice-me-not pendant I made for him when he gets too old for his monster-repelling bracelet? Fisken will be keeping it safe until then. And also make sure he knows when he's old enough to remember that he's always welcome at the Hall.

Alright — I think that's everything.
It was an unparalleled delight to know you, a /hazy blotch/ and I hope you find every happiness available to you. My wish for you is that this life becomes all that you want it to be, that whatever dreams you have stay big and that your worries stay small. That you never need to carry more than you can hold. And while you’re out there doing what you must, I hope you know that somebody loves you, and even on the other side, I will still do so.

Thank you for your part in my life, for reminding me there is more to this world than what unpleasantness I see of it. Be well. Stay safe.

With all my love,

Heri

Within the folds of a self-contained dimension, upon a mountain of structured clouds, in a gilded sanctuary of her own making, a lonesome goddess pondered. Outside was idyllic, a picturesque paradise filled with other deities whiling their time away with whatever fancies that suit them, but she had no desire to join them just then. In her private rooms there was no one around for her to put on a face for, no one to become suspicious if she behaved outside of what was her norm. Without the obligation of pretending all was well, she thought long and hard on the child she had never thought she’d have.

She sat half laying on the arm of a chaise, cheek supported against one fist. She was not usually one to sprawl to indolently, but she was in no mood for propriety — not now when a child of hers had lost their life.

Not often did she dwell on mortals and their realm — that was the way of over-attachment and inevitable heartache. They were amusing of course and had the potential for many useful things, but she wasn't one to get invested more than she absolutely needed to. It was not that she looked down on them, but she was no masochist as so many of her brethren seemed to be.

But then came this daughter, a hero she had not anticipated.

The goddess sighed gustily through her nose.

She would not attempt to kid herself even momentarily that she hadn't created the child with a purpose. Every demigod, claimed or not, was created very intentionally. One did not impregnate a goddess without her consent, and the essence of a god was not held back by any man-made creation. With a 'purpose' in mind or not, a demigod was not created without a deity intending for it to happen. And she was just as complicit as any other.

Though that did not account for how differently the almost twenty years now had strayed from what she had imagined. The purpose she had in mind wasn't out of reach by any means, but not even her most fanciful imaginings held a candle to what came to pass. A worthy hero she had imagined for certain, but to such renown? It was beyond expectations.

A ghost of a smile lifted her lips.

And more satisfying than she had thought possible.

She could not help a swell of self-congratulatory pride. Were there any other demigod out there that could hold a candle to her most recent daughter? She would laugh if any thought they could.

At the end of the day, to have the child had been a whim, and such whims were not uncommon amongst her kind. This particular child though, this Herakles Potter . . .
For certain the girl defied all expectations.

Any mirth slid from the goddess' face.

A shame that a life full of unexplored potential had been cut so short.

In a forest not well-travelled, all was quiet in the fall of dusk. Too quiet really — not a bird chirped, not an insect twittered — there was nothing to hear save the howl of the wind through the trees.

The silence was heavy, expectant, though none of the inhabitants could name what it was they were anticipating.

And then there was the almost inaudible tinkle of dew icing over.

A ragged man leapt from the shadows of a rock formation and dashed into the trees. He cleared maybe fifteen feet into the bush before he shuddered from a deep chill surging through him.

Panting, he looked behind him and —

The sky was dotted with fluttering wraiths.

Heart in his throat, he sprinted forward like a man possessed, horrors creeping into his mind.

Apparate! He had to Apparate!

But even as he readied himself, multiple cracks like lightning strikes littered the nearby area, distracting him and panicking him further.

"HE'S OVER THERE!" he heard from his right, a stream of blue flying over his head, missing him by a hair.

Shouts sounded, colours flying every which way.

The Aurors had found him.

Frenzied, he tried Disapparating away, but he was bounced back into place like a giant had smacked him with a backhand. His head spun, the breath knocked right out of him.

Wards.

He was trapped.

Groaning, gasping from the concussing force, he flung a spell out where he heard the nearest voice was. To his horror, it shorted and died not a foot after it left his wand.

*May your spells fizzle out —*

"Surrender, Rowle!" bellowed an Auror pointing a red-tipped wand. "You're surrounded!"

As he said, Rowle could see Aurors everywhere he turned, closing in.

Thinking quickly, Rowle plucked a knife from his holster and flung it at the head of the Auror closest to him. It flew straight and true —!

*— may your weapons miss their mark —*
— but merely skimmed the cheek of his foe, the Auror ducking away in time.

Taking advantage of the split second of distraction, Rowle streaked past the shocked Auror and towards the shimmering edge of the ward.

He could see it! It was just there — right there! He could make it!

Desperation fuelling him, he out-stripped the Aurors speeding after him, eating ground at a manic pace.

Now thirty feet — now twenty — five —!

He broke through!

Laughter bubbling out of him, Rowle turned on his heels and —!

A bolt of red flung him off his feet, sending him head-first into a tree.

— may you be just that second too slow!

Thorfinn Rowle — Marked Death Eater yet to be incarcerated — landed in a heap of slack limbs, neck at an awkward angle.

He was dead before he hit the ground.

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Draco Malfoy, lately a resident of Number 12 Grimmauld Place, sat cross-legged on the floor of the nursery of said residence with a sleeping infant cradled in his arms. No one else was awake at this hour — being near three in the morning — but he had not yet slept that night and had nowhere else to be, and his feet had led him to the nursery where he had been in prime position to take care of the baby when he woke and soothe him before he had the chance to wake anyone else.

Now half slumped against the wall, hunched over the child like a hungry spectre, Draco how it had come to this — him mourning for Heri Potter.

Draco hadn't known what to expect when he appealed to Potter and Dumbledore for the sake of his parents halfway through his sixth year. When he had come to his senses after his pathetic crying fit, he was so sure they would milk him for any information he was worth and then toss him back out to be labelled a traitor — that's what Dark Lord would have done if not just killing the defector outright. But instead of using him and leaving him out to dry, Potter herself had participated in the planning of the retrieval of his parents, even volunteering her as-of-then-unexplained powers to aid in the rescue, only to be shot down by her guardians and Dumbledore for it being 'unnecessary risk' to herself.

And then Draco and his parents had been stowed away in a Black residence in Wales, hidden under piles of wards. It wasn't Fidelius protection, but, mercifully, the Dark Lord ranked their disappearance as of lesser importance than his takeover of Europe. That didn't mean they didn't live in unholy terror of being discovered and killed though, even with a circulation of guards from the Order of the Phoenix.

Draco's mother had tried to stay positive for him, praising him for so cleverly getting them out of harm's way and always making sure he knew she was proud of him for learning to pick his fights. His father, on the other hand, seemed torn between furiously humiliated at living on the Order's mercy and unspeakably relieved they no longer suffered under the Dark Lord's thumb. Neither were happy they were essentially refugees, but they made sure Draco knew they weren't angry at him for what he chose to do.
They were moved into Number 12 not long after Potter let the bomb drop that she was a godborn. Their previous guards no longer had the time to go between the main headquarters and the house in Wales; they had their hands full with the Dark Lord's retaliation and gathering supporters abroad. Draco spent what should have been his seventh year at Hogwarts cloistered in the Black ancestral home, being educated by his mother and fretting as things on the outside got worse and worse. He had objectively known that achieving the Dark Lord's pureblood utopia would require the elimination of their opposition, but Draco hadn't realised exactly what that would entail until he read the horror stories in the Daily Prophet.

He barely saw Potter in all that time. She'd either been busy up on her floor of the house or out seeing to her DA during the summer, and when school started up again, he saw her in passing during the holidays, and even then she was usually on her way out to see supporters. Any words she had for the defecting family she was sheltering in her home went through Draco's mother almost exclusively; his father refused to speak with her and Draco was helplessly tongue-tied.

Every time he'd seen her, he'd wanted to ask why she'd done it — why she'd helped him — just like he had years before when she saved him from that hippogriff.

God, that hippogriff! Draco had been angry about that incident for weeks afterwards! If it wasn't enough that it was a stain on his pride, Potter's defamation after the fact was as shaming as it was galling.

"Why did you save me?" Draco had asked her, for he would have done nothing of the sort for her — he would have laughed had it been she who had been attacked and would have derided her on her way to the Hospital Wing.

Had she some hidden affection for him? He had wondered. Did he hold more importance in her estimation than he had thought?

No, it was nothing like all that. Definitely not.

Potter had given Draco a patently unimpressed look and a tongue-lashing that would have made his childhood tutors proud.

"I don't like you, Malfoy." She had told him with more coldness she had ever directed at him before. She then went on to list exactly why he was scum to her, cutting him down worse than he'd ever been before with just a few plainly stated words.

"But," she then said, her harshness fading, "never once have I wished you dead."

And he wondered for a minute what that said about him because he had often wished her dead since that first time they met and she showed him up on Longbottom's behalf.

Originally, it had been her ending remark that he was "a hideous, horrendous, little haemorrhoid on the arse-end of society" that made him seethe and sulk, but it was her assertions of "You are someone's friend, and you are someone's son," and, "it's obvious your parents love you very much," and, "I wouldn't let their boy die if there was something I could do to prevent it" that nudged him in the back of his mind even when he was hyped up on rage at her.

Blasted Potter always getting under his skin.

The baby snuffled and shifted in Draco's arms, drawing his attention back to the little creature. Draco observed him carefully.
He'd never interacted with babies before, never had the chance. His parents' friends and acquaintances were mostly Death Eaters or supporters, and not many of them were partnered off; family-life just didn't suit them. Draco, Theo, Crabbe, Goyle, and the Carrow twins (the younger pair) were the only children to be produced. The youngest Draco had ever had anything to do with himself were the Carrow twins when they were five, and that was when he himself was only seven — he'd never been anywhere near an infant. Yet here he was now, tending to a child.

A child belonging to his half-blood cousin and her werewolf husband, both of the type he'd been raised to despise.

A child that was Heri Potter's godchild — one she had never actually met.

A child that was to be the next Head of House Black.

Draco softly stroked the baby's dark hair, marvelling at how fine it was.

Theodore (Draco refused to use the ridiculous pet name that was 'Teddy') was an uncommonly happy baby — or at least very happy in comparison to what Draco had heard of other babies — and was usually gurgling contentedly to himself when awake. He hadn't started walking yet, but he was still very mobile, crawling like he'd been born to move about on all fours. Draco had been tempted to state that observation out loud when it first crossed his mind out of the habit of deriding bloodlines such as the ones the child had, but then little beast had grinned toothlessly up at Draco and morphed to white-blonde hair and grey eyes.

This little mongrel dared to be so sweet and endearing as if everything he was wasn't spitting in the face of everything Draco was and wanted.

In all Draco's childhood dreams of the future, the prestige of being the Marquess of Swetechester had been amongst the crowning glory. His parents had promised it to him as soon as he could understand words, telling him it would be his to claim when he came of age because he was the only living (and still legitimate) descendant that House Black had. Draco would then bring greater acclaim to the Malfoy name!

House Malfoy — while old, and wealthy, and pureblooded — was not an Ancient House nor ennobled. The fact had left a bitter taste of the tongues of all Malfoys before him. The first of their name had come over from France not three hundred years ago, only a few short decades before the signing of the International Statute of Secrecy, and therefore did not have enough time to establish himself and gain the favour of the Crown before that avenue of social elevation was barred from him. Oh, they were gentry, but titled standing was not theirs. They married ennobled daughters frequently, but the line of inheritance had never fallen their way.

That was until the main branch of his mother's House died off and left their line of descent conspicuously empty of any heirs, not even a bastard child from the black sheep of the family rotting away in Azkaban, who'd been shunned but not actually disinherited. Suddenly, nobility was within the Malfoy's grasps.

And then it had been stolen from him by Potter under the blessings of her godfather, the previously incarcerated Head of House Black.

And now it was again tauntingly beyond him in the hands of her own godchild, grandchild of his re-legitimized Aunt Andromeda, who was older than his mother, making her line higher in the line of inheritance.

Draco didn't know if he had it in him to be upset by it any longer. So many things that had once
seemed immensely important now felt trivial and bland. Things he had taken pride in, things that had defined him as a person, had defined his family . . . . What good had any of it done their family when they were branded traitors to the Dark Lord and had to hide away from those they once counted as comrades lest they be tortured and killed? Granted, they were traitors and deserters to the cause, but . . . what they had as followers had been little better, likely even worse since they had been in the direct line of fire.

What good had his lineage done for him when his parents were battered minions to a violent overlord? What benefits did his blood-purity grant him when he was forced to beg protection and refuge from those he had declared beneath him?

At least when Potter had been around, it all felt less like grovelling to peasants and more siding with a powerful ally. Crawling to Dumbledore and his ilk? Repulsive. Going to Potter on the other hand . . . she made it clear that she wasn't taking pity on the 'poor, deluded blood-purist finally seeing he was wrong’ but instead was taking them in because she wanted them safe no matter what it was they believed in; Potter hadn't expected him to change his beliefs nor change his ways (even though he was slowly coming about to that), she just saw someone asking for help, and gave it freely.

It was odd that what he once derided as weak and sentimental was now something that made his throat burn and his insides ache with hollowness.

"She died for us," Draco had heard whispered in the halls as Order members came in and out. "She destroyed herself to smite You-Know-Who."

The papers — local and international — were ablaze with tales of how Heri Potter combusted with all the fury and radiance of a dying star going supernova. For a godborn to force out their divinity in such a way, to soak in faith and go into full theophany despite their mortal body, was to knowingly kill themselves. There was nothing to be found of her — every molecule of her had been converted into pure energy to power the explosion. The only physical evidence left of her actions were the charred scraps of her wand and the Dark Lord's ashes.

Potter quite literally died in a blaze of glory and took her enemy with her.

People now flocked to site in a morbid parody of pilgrimage. The Great Hall was melted at the epicentre of the detonation, the area now unnaturally smooth and imprinted with swirling dark scars around a circle — the spot where Potter stood when she came undone. Some said the decal looked like a lily in bloom, but the most popular assertion was that it was a flaring sun. There was talk of building a memorial for everyone who had died that day.

Draco hadn't yet been out to see the damage for himself. He hadn't left Number 12 even once. He didn't really know what he was feeling — uncomfortably like a soap bubble set adrift on an unsteady breeze — but he did know he wasn't at all up to seeing where . . . the place she . . . .

Black — former Head of House, now Regent — had been kind enough to not say anything about Draco leaving even though his parents were already out seeing to their home. He suspected this kindness was mainly due to Black having his own sorrow to deal with.

Never had Draco seen a man more ruined than Sirius Black, not even amongst the freshly freed inmates from Azkaban who had invaded Malfoy Manor. Never had he seen a man more defeated. Not even in his private thoughts did he want to linger on Sirius Black in the throes of his nearly unhinged grief.

It was better to start looking to the future.
A future without Heri Potter.

So where was Draco to go from here? In this darkened nursery in this hollowed-out house, the rest of the world felt so far away, so beyond him. What was out there for him after all that's been said and done? Any friends he had were likely dead or incarcerated. Any ambitions he previously had felt juvenile and inane.

Again his eyes returned to the sleeping bundle in his arms — his cousin; something of a rival; a half-blood that cheerfully trod all over his values and standards . . .

Draco never had the chance to pay Potter back for all that she'd done for him. He never had the chance to properly ally himself with her and stand beside her on common ground.

"I will pay my dues to you, little cousin," Draco whispered to the oblivious child snoozing away. He hiked his arms up higher, pressing the child closer to his chest. "I will be a hand that holds you up and guides you. And when you stand with your back straight and your head held high, every inch of the lord she would want you to be, I will know that the debt is paid."

Viktor Krum had not been amongst the reinforcements that arrived at Hogwarts when the Death Eaters invaded. He had not been in the crowd when Heri Potter expended herself. Viktor had not been on the British Isle at all when the news hit that Heri Potter tore herself apart with her own grace and destroyed You-Know-Who.

Viktor Krum was not available for any interviews no matter what publication came calling. He was not seen outside of his home for a long while after.

It was a regrettable state of affairs that Hogwarts was now hosting a number of new ghosts. Not many, mind you, but any number was still more than anyone wanted to see. They dotted the school, not quite identifiable just yet, vague shapes with indistinct features.

The older ghosts welcomed the newer lot as best as they could, all in their own ways. The Bloody Baron and the Grey Lady looked uncomfortable and vaguely pitying — and Peeves certainly didn't do more than jeer — but Sir Nicholas and the Fat Friar rallied the more kind-hearted spirits and tried to ease the new ghosts through the shock of now being apparitions. This was no easy task though, for many of the new ghosts were overcome with despair and/or thunderous fury, spending most of their time weeping and howling, the calmer ones barely even acknowledging anything outside of the mindless haunting of familiar places — a phase many ghosts who had died as children rarely moved on from.

Case in point: Myrtle Warren, she of 'Moaning Myrtle' infamy, who was still fixated on her loo even after over three decades following her death. Myrtle was also amongst the older ghosts who didn't do much to help integrate the new ones. Outside of the new ghosts, the one who was taking their presence the worst was unarguably Myrtle. Upon catching sight of one, she would burst into hysterical tears even worse than her usual fits and carry on so loudly that her wails could be heard all over the entire floor.

Even the teachers and the living students were coping better.

No amount of comfort from anyone, living or amortal, assuaged poor Myrtle in any capacity. Those who had been around to see it claimed that she was as badly off as when she had first died. Moreover, this had the unfortunate effect of inciting upset amongst the new ghosts to an even greater extent, the negative energy Myrtle exuded provoking them further.
There was one new ghost that didn’t behave in a distraught manner though — it was a little one (much to the sorrow of any who saw it) and it was the most indistinct in appearance out of them all. It was amongst the ones that wandered through previously travelled routes, but for some reason... it seemed oddly aware, more coherent than how it should have been, far too coherent for a senseless ghast.*

Strange awareness was not the only thing that set that young ghost apart. As time passed and the other younger ghosts began becoming more distinct, to the point where they could be identified as who they were in life, that one stayed blurry, like a silhouette of fog and mist. While the others rediscovered speech, that one only ever sighed.

The older ghosts didn’t know what to think — to be a ghost was to be a person that had been too afraid to move on, a spirit that clung to the world of the living to the point where they were still proper people, just without corporeal forms — to be a ghost in the first place meant that you desperately wanted to live to the point where you manifested as you did in life! Even ghasts manifested fully, slowly but surely!

But maybe it didn’t know it could manifest fully? Had it been a muggleborn in life? Muggleborns rarely became ghosts because of how unknowledgeable Muggles were about the reality of souls and the afterlife... maybe it simply didn’t know how to become corporeal? These were the thoughts of those who took note of the strange spirit.

And then one day — inexplicably — the ghosts of Hogwarts collectively began bowing as it passed.

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In a space between worlds, outside the boundaries of all the kingdoms of the dead, there was Nothingness. (No, not just nothing — there was 🤑♭cdfw+'vœ*Ӎ.œڅ!) Within the depths of this nothingness, there was a (†¿¡₰日电) soul, and this soul knew only Nothingness, but It once knew sensation, sensation It was now remembering. There had once been warmth, aN_CREAT^k¿ץIesy. . . . But there was only nothing now.

Nothing but the dreams of a life long passed.

In this Nothing was the soul once known as Ê XK Ƥŋ ę commercials, and It couldn’t help but dream of Her first love.

What’s with this hang-dog look, huh, Titch?”

With those fiğ *MentwOrDsExistEnce a world formed.

---
He shrugged, unbothered as can be. "Are you . . . ? You're not . . . 

"You'd think that, wouldn't you?" he said. He looked down at himself in bemusement. "I certainly not-Marcus raised his eyebrows, the smirk half of his expression becoming more prominent.

"Yo-u're n . . . not . . . real."

Heri closed her eyes again, her lips trembling.

He was just as she remembered. He was . . .

It was too good to be true. He was just as she remembered!

He drank him in eagerly, eyes taking in as many details as she could. As tall as she remembered (What? He still had some growing years left when she last saw him . . .), with that half-smirk-half-grimace she found so endearing. He was wearing his Hogwarts' uniform (No, that wasn't — he hated it! He'd said himself he'd never wear it again!) with his tie half-undone, his free hand (Whole. Why when she knew he lost a finger in a duel after graduation?) scratching at a spot above his collar.

It was too good to be true. He was just as she remembered!

He was . . .

*He was just as she remembered.*

Heri closed her eyes again, her lips trembling.

"Yo-u're n . . . not . . . real."

Not-Marcus raised his eyebrows, the smirk half of his expression becoming more prominent.

"You'd think that, wouldn't you?" he said. He looked down at himself in bemusement. "I certainly haven't looked like this in a while."

Her eyes snapped open at the odd statement, taking him in more cautiously.

"Are you . . . ? You're not . . . " she murmured warily, getting to her feet. "You can't be . . . ."

He shrugged, unbothered as can be.
"Eh, I can't really say either way. I definitely remember being me and dying—"

"How did you die?" Heri shrieked, lunging at him in alarm. "How—? When—?"

"Easy, kid!" He grunted as they impacted, curling an arm around her when she grabbed at his front and started shaking him. "Steady on—!"

"How?" she demanded again, vibrating and overwhelmed from how everything suddenly was.

Possibly-Marcus groaned and rubbed at his clenched eyes with the back of his thumb, a motion Heri was well familiar with, having been on the receiving end of such a motion several times before.

"I was jumped by some Death Eaters — I don't remember when — and I guess there were more than what I saw 'cos I'm pretty sure I got nailed from behind."

"I thought you were out of the country," Heri breathed, resting her forehead on his shoulder. "Before he even came back — Lucian said you went abroad!"

Probably-Marcus shrugged.

"I did."

"Why then?! You were supposed to be in — in, um —" Heri wracked her still sluggish and disconnected mind for the word. "It was . . . ! Oh, damnation!"

"It was Bolivia," Likely-Marcus told her, patting her on the head. "And did you really think I would stay away? I —"

— What?

"What just happened?" said Heri, looking around.

There was a noise, and for a second, everything seemed to flicker.

Marcus looked just as confused.

"I dunno," he said, looking suspiciously up at the 'sky.' "I thought . . . . Wasn't this place . . . ?"

"What are saying?"

"No, it's just . . . " he shook his head. "This place . . . It's not supposed to fall apart yet! He told me —"

— ARGH! —!

"What is that?!" Heri yelped, clapping her hands to her ears.

"I don't know!" said Marcus, voice rising as the ground shook. "I don't —!"
"Okay! Okay!" Marcus bellowed. "Whatever I did, I'm sorry!"

At once, the strange flickering and shaking halted, leaving the courtyard deathly silent, save for the laboured breathing of the two within.

"Marcus?" said Heri hesitantly, eyes wide and wary. "What . . . ?"

Marcus was silent for several beats.

"I . . . I don't right know . . ." he said. "It's just . . . I reckon I'm not supposed to tell you what little I do know —"

†

"I said okay!" he yelped, holding his hands up in surrender.

"What is going on?!" Heri demanded, distressed. She looked around suspiciously. "What is this place?"

"Listen, Heri," said Marcus, grabbing her forearm. "We don't have a lot of time. They let me come 'cos you were thinking of me, but I'm pretty sure the big boss hates my guts —"

— †

"RIGHT! SORRY!" he bellowed sharply, keeping his eyes on Heri. "Anyway — yeah, I died; yeah, it sucked, but I don't regret it, and I don't want you to regret it, 'cos none of that bullocks was your fault, you hear me? And —"

As he spoke, the ground started shaking again, but this time, he merely glared and kept on talking.

"— sucks that I died 'fore we could meet up again properly —"

Cracks opened in the ground, spiderwebbing out, dark vapour rising out.

"— I missed you, brat — I'm not going to lie —"

The sky was now churning charcoal and puce, the once idyllic clouds reaching fat fingers down.

"— felt rotten that things were gonna be left like that —"

"Marcus, maybe we shouldn't —" Heri tried, wide-eyed as the fissures were now overtaking their
bodies as well. She gasped when her hands disintegrated.

But he didn't stop, carry on even as parts of him began flaking off.

"— told yOU I WOULD —"

There was a guttural, echoing groan that resonated all around them as if they were in the belly of a beast in full rage. All around, the structures visible fractured and shattered in double-time, some imploding while others exploded. The earth-shattering whatever-it-was was now silent, angrily and accusingly so as the sound of destruction took over, gale winds ripping up vegetation and sediment, thunder banging uproariously.

Marcus looked at her steadily even though half his body was gone, bone and sinew now visible as that too crumbled.

"I'm about to be recycled or whatever," he said, grim, now more dust and bone than flesh. "They don't want me staying too long for whatever reason — it sure as Hell ain't 'cos they like me. Hell, I was on my way out before you started thinking about me — They were pissed as fuck."

"Who are 'they'?" Heri demanded urgently above the moaning of the monstrous wind, watching helplessly as darkness was edging up on them.

"Hell if I know," Marcus grimaced. "Whoever's running this show I reckon. Can't say I care too much at this point, but at least I got to see you one more time before I'm sent out again. I might be an absolute bastard, but I made you a promise and I'm going to see it through."

"A promise?" she muttered. "What —?"

And then she remembered:

"I won't be too young forever — You just watch — I'll grow up taller an' super pretty an' then you'll definitely stop saying I'm too little! You'll see! You just wait! Um . . . You will wait . . . won't you?"

"Sure thing, runt. Just don't take forever, yeah?"

Heri choked on a strangled sham of a laugh, her eyes stinging with the dust of existence and the burn of tears.

"Y-you waited."

Marcus grinned wryly, more exposed skull than flesh, bone collapsing into dust at the motion and swirling away as it was caught up in the wind.
"I said I would, didn't I?"

"Y-you ... you . . ." Her eyes fell closed, clenching shut as she felt more and more of herself dispersing. "Marcus . . . thank you. You still . . . after all this time . . . I'm sorry, I — I made you wait for nothing."

"It wasn't nothing, brat," Marcus refuted, his voice now thin and wispy. "Even if nothing ever came of it, I'm glad I got to see you one more time . . . while I'm still me enough for —"

But before he could finish, all existence was ripped away.

— \[x \in \mathbb{C} \wedge \theta \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell \ni \ell

On a crisp fall day in November, Sally Jackson and her little boy were enjoying Thanksgiving at a
local park. The leaves were freshly fallen, a brisk chill was in the air, and bellies were currently full
as Percy gleefully scaled some monkey bars and made a face at another boy hogging the other side.

Thanksgiving was a time that Sally always tried to make sure was happy and fun for her baby. Not
that there had been enough instances for it to fall into a habit of right or wrong — her son had just
turned five this year after all — but she wanted the memories of it to be happy as far back as Percy
can remember as he grew older. And so she had made it a tradition on her own that on Thanksgiving
they would pack up a big hamper of food made the day before and spend the entire day out and
about, stopping to picnic wherever they felt like.

This year they had spent a great deal of time window-shopping, but Percy eventually grew bored
with that and asked to explore a park they'd never gone to before.

So enthralled was she with watching her child, Sally nearly missed a tall figure standing in the shade
of a tree across the playground from her.

A chill went up her spine when she saw their head was turned towards her boy.

Sally was on her feet before she could conceptualize her panic, but then the figure snapped their
attention to her, and she was pinned by the heavy assessment.

It was a woman of some sort, Sally realised. Uncommonly tall with a severe look on her face.

Said woman kept Sally in place a moment longer before inclining her head just so —

— A mother and daughter pair ran across her field of vision —

— and in the next blink, she was gone.

"Momma?" a lisping voice called, startling Sally at the nearness.

Percy blinked up at her, a stick held like a sword in his hands.

"Are you okay?" he asked, reaching out to hold her hand.

Sally squeeze that little hand tenderly and then swung her boy up in her arms. She rubbed her cheek
purposely against his, drawing out a squeal and a giggle.

"I'm just perfect, sweetheart," she told him. "I just thought I saw some bird in that tree."

Her sweet Percy took her at her words and just hummed agreeably.

Setting him on her hip, she started walking quickly, plucking up their picnic hamper from the park
bench she'd left it at.

"But I think it's high time we start heading home now. We've been here for a while, don't you
think?"

Paying Percy's protests little mind, Sally tried not to feel like she was running away even as she felt
the prickle of eyes on her retreating back.

A brisk autumn wind blew a volley of brightly coloured leaves into the air, sending them flying over
a flock of children laughing and capering down the street. As they settled once more, they were
crunched underfoot by another happy herd, all in good cheer and dressed vividly.
Though it was now evening, the streets were brightly lit and filled with children. Every house was gloriously decorated, pumpkins and cobwebs and other such ornamentation creeping down from porches and into the front lawns. The shrieks and shouts of festivities could be heard from nearly every corner of the neighbourhood.

Standing at the gate to the cemetery, a cloaked figure stood idle on the pavement, looking much like a decoration himself. A few curious eyes were drawn to him, but any that fancied the idea of approaching were drawn away by more level-headed chaperones. No one was overly suspicious yet, but no one much liked the look of him.

Finally accepting he could not loiter much longer, Sirius Black girded up what tenacity he still had within him and shuffled his way up the street. The passing faces, all bright and joyous, sent sharp pain through his heart, but he doggedly continued his trek, trying to tune out the happy sounds.

He didn't know exactly why he was doing this, on this night of all nights. He didn't know what compelled him to come where it all started. But whatever triggered this madness, he was here now and he would see it through.

Eventually, he found himself at the gates of where he both yearned for and dreaded: the shambled ruin of Potter Cottage. There must have been some kind of Muggle-repelling ward in effect because not one of the happy families roaming the streets spared him a glance after he stepped into the shadow of the dilapidated old building. Hand twitching, shoulders shaking, he pushed open the rusted gate and stepped onto the premises.

Like in a dream, he walked into the house, and the memories of that horrible night washed over him. At the foot of the stairs was where he'd found James, and the pain of it was as fresh as ever. For a moment, he could move no further and had to lean in the rickety railing to hold himself up. After longer than he'd want to admit, he dragged himself up the stairs, hot tears leaving tracks on his cheeks.

The room at the end of the hall . . . that was where . . .

He retraced the footsteps he had taken that night.

With a sense of inevitability, Sirius pushed open the nursery door, sending a cloud of dust into the air. Images of Lily crumpled on the floor were already in his mind.

The memories of her fiery hair haloed around her imprinted into the back of his mind, it took Sirius longer than it should have to realise that the red hair trailing across the moulded rug in front of him was not just a delusion of his own making.

He nearly choked on his own tongue as a hazy silhouette faded into visibility as his eyes travelled down from the long stretch of hair. Dust — oddly golden — was swirling and twisting and dipping, drifting around a shape that appeared to be sketching itself into existence.

Heart pounding in his eyes, Sirius could only gasp and wheeze as more and more of — but it couldn't be —! Familiar limbs formed together and made an all too familiar shape, colours bleeding in like water-colour paint being blotted away but backwards, and then suddenly, impossibly —

"H-Heri . . . ?" Sirius whispered pleadingly, falling to his knees. His shaking hand reached out, but he didn't yet dare touch the girl splayed on the dirty floor; the girl who had died and burst into light and dust, who was now here once more, formed out of light and dust.

Eyelids fluttered and then dazed green eyes blinked open.
Chapter End Notes

* I encountered this word in the first book of the Wardstone series, another YA fantasy series involving magic. It's been years since I read it, but the word 'ghast' has stuck with me because I was fascinated by how the writer invented his own classification system for undead spirits, 'ghasts' being ghosts that aren't aware of the world around them and just continually re-enact their deaths. It's a very clever play on words, 'ghast' resembling 'ghost' and yet also making the reader think of 'ghastly', meaning horrible, gory, terrifying, etc. Taken at face-value, calling it a ghast is plain calling it a thing that incites terror.

AN1: Whooooooeyyy! Three cheers for Interlude II! It's been a long time coming (for various reasons), but here we are now! God, I say something like this every chapter don't I? But it's always true, so, yeah . . .

AN2: I'm planning to be more active on Tumblr, so if you want you can follow me at hi-pot-and-news!tumblr!com. Hope you like reblogs, ranting, and free-verse poetry, cuz that's what I'm all about. (Oh, and updates about my fics.)

AN3 IMPORTANT! For various reasons (that I will explain in an update on my profile) I have not had the means to write. It's just life, but it truly makes me unhappy. The TL;DR is that I'm not in a good situation right now and have to focus on paying the bills instead of writing. On a suggestion from a friend, I've made a ko-fi account, so if you're interested in supporting my writing, go to my Ko-fi page. Literally just an extra 15 bucks (five ko-fis) a week would save me so much stress.

ALSO: I have a poetry anthology called Canto Compendium: Stories Written in Verse. It's available at just about anywhere ebooks can be bought, but I would appreciate it if you go through Lulu. I will eventually have more books out as well.
I have no words to give you for how it feels posting this chapter. At many points, it felt like I was done for good, that this would be yet another unfinished story. There may be some point that I truly must give up on this, but it's not today.

This chapter is very short by this fic's standards, but I hope you like it all the same.

A gusty wind swept through the streets of London, sending hats flying and loose hair fluttering. It was overcast — not much of a surprise — but the clouds were thinning instead of darkening.

In a hidden section of the city, a newspaper tumbled down a narrow pass between closed kiosks. It eventually settled again when a corner dragged in a puddle of yesterday's rain, splaying itself against the curb. On the front page read:

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the

DAILY PROPHET

* Wizarding Britain's Premier News Source *

(November 22, 1997)

A GODDESS REBORN?

By Groundsel Eisman

Two weeks ago, an anonymous tip informed us at the Prophet that the Ramon Llull ward of St Mungo's Hospital was hosting an astoundingly high-profile patient. Healers are on record of signing waivers and making Oaths before being allowed to attend to the said patient. It was only when certain known persons were seen coming and going that this reporter dared to suspect who exactly it was being treated with such secrecy.

It was too impossible. I told myself I was foolish for the thought to have even crossed my mind.

After several days of no comments when being questioned, it was revealed that my suspicion — unthinkable as it was — was correct: The resident of St Mungo's most private ward is none other than Heri Potter.

You read that correctly, dear reader. The Girl Who Lived lives again!
March 26, 1998

Three people occupied a brightly lit hospital room; one was tucked into the bed, dead to the world despite her pulse; the other two stood vigil, waiting for had been declared medically impossible. Sounds of other people coming and going about their business could be heard beyond the closed door, but they were muffled, and the only other audible noise was the shallow breathing of the two standing watch.

In the opinion of the one standing at the foot of the bed, the thick quiet within the room was more back-bending than true silence might have been.

"It'll be today," said the one seated to the side of the bed, making her companion start. "It's too bad none of the others will get here in time.

Neville Longbottom, the young man on his feet, tucked his arms behind his back and sighed gustily through his nose.

"It's not that I doubt you, Luna," he began, brows furrowing, "but how are you so sure?"

"They'll all be held up in their own ways," said Luna, smoothing a bit of blanket near the pillow. "All at just the wrong time, throwing off their schedule by a few minutes at the very least. A pity, really. The Fates are against them today."

Neville's nose crinkled.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

Luna shrugged, the most flippant and purposely so she'd ever been. She fidgeted with the hem of her sleeve.

"I know because I know," she said, her tone almost impatient. "Sometimes, what I know becomes different than what is and what happens, but, to date, none of the others have altered what I know happens by their own efforts alone. Hannah will be held up by a fellow trying to chat her up; Ernie will be stuck at home for a bit trying to find the Floo powder he bought yesterday and forgot to put at the mantle; Hermione will take longer than she expects to turn in her application to join the Department of Mysteries; Mr Black will —"

"Alright! Alright!" Neville threw up his hands in surrender. "I get it!"

"Heri could change it," Luna murmured, not looking away from the figure in the bed. "She even changed events I thought were set in stone. What many gods couldn't, she could."

Neville shifted, a grimace on his face.

"When did the gods decide to participate in society again?" he grumbled, mostly to himself. "Before he came back . . . they might as well have not existed! And now the Fates take a personal interest in inconveniencing a person turning in their resumé?"

Luna looked at him carefully out of the corner of her eye.

"It's not like the Fates are actively picking and choosing — they just weave the threads as they come. And the gods are as they always are. It's just that you are now aware of them."
"Doesn't mean I can't point out how odd it is they decided to dip their fingers in now. When's the last time any of them got so interested like this?"

Luna canted her head to the side.

"Have they though? I suppose it must seem like essentially the same thing from a point of view, but the most divine of interventions that happened came from semidieous beings — the most we can truly claim the gods interfered was in making us, and they've been doing that as they always have."

Neville frowned at the floor. After a pause, he moved around the bed and sat at the edge.

"I hear what you're saying," he said, resting his elbows on his knees. "It just feels like all of this wouldn't have been as — as enormous as it's been if it was purely mortal affairs."

Luna hummed.

"I can't say I would want it that way even if it would have been more simple. Not that I can say definitively that it would be simpler.

"I spoke with Gran-Gran once," Luna revealed. "In a dream, that is. She told me a bit about possibilities that never came to pass within this timeline. I asked about Heri since she'd just saved me from at least three years of being an outcast within Ravenclaw. . . . She told me that this was one of the rare, rare timelines that Heri was anything other than human.

"In fact, Heri, as we know her, exists only in this timeline. The incidents that led to her birth were one . . . one in . . . I can't remember how many; several million at least. I wasn't told all the details, of course, but if the gods were not as they are, and her parents hadn't invoked for a child, and her divine mother hadn't taken note of their request, Herakles Lilith Potter would have been born Harry James Potter — a fully human wizard."

Neville went wide-eyed.

"How do you just unload information like that just like that?!" he wheezed. "Merlin!"

Luna blinked slowly at him.

"A multiverse isn't a new concept. . . ."

"That doesn't mean I was ready to hear it!" Neville protested. "For go-goodness' sake! It's not something you just sit around thinking about, is it? And — Ugh — I-I can't — I can't even. . . ." — Neville rubbed his face both hands — "I can't imagine how much worse things would be if Heri'd been just a regular w-wizard! A regular bloke — a bloke our age, too — ag-against You-Know-Who? Bloody Hell, we got off easy then!"

"Don't you go underestimating Harry Potter; a fully human wizard is their most common incarnation throughout all realities, and they are nearly always born with the fate to defeat You-Know-Who, even when they aren't marked as the chosen one. They are always a significant addition to their timeline whether against You-Know-Who or for him."

A full-body shudder nearly unseated Neville.

"You can stop right there — I don't even want to contemplate a reality where Heri sides with You-Know-Who."

"To be fair," Luna said reasonably, "in many realities, You-Know-Who is morally grey at most —"
"Nope."

"I suppose you aren't interested in hearing —"

"Likely not —"

"— that you are frequently —"

"No."

"— Boy Who Lived instead of —"

"NO, THANK YOU."

Luna broke out in a quiet, breathy giggle, cutting through the heavy gloom of the room.

Neville's lips twitched upward reluctantly. Now feeling lighter himself, he joined her, burying his face in his hands and laughing helplessly into them. He couldn't say what it was that was funny, or if it actually was at all, but it felt good to laugh again.

A creak from the bed cut them off.

Head whipping up, Neville nearly choked on his tongue when he saw Heri's left hand spasm and tighten into a fist.

"Heri?" he croaked, scrambling to his feet again. Neville didn't know what to do with himself. He hovered frantically as Luna leaned forward in her seat and grabbed Heri's other hand. "W-What do w-w-we d-do?!"

Luna winced when the hand she was holding spasmed as well, clenching her fingers in a vice-grip.

"A . . . a healer?" she suggested, distracted, watching Heri's face obsessively. "They have . . . they have, um, monitoring spells on . . . on her, right? Someone should be —" She cut herself off with a squeak.

Heri's grip tightened again, grinding Luna's bones together. Soon after, it slackened for a second, freeing Luna just before the fingers began twitching erratically. Inhaling a breath so deep that it seemed to possess her, Heri arched up, her head lolling. She remained rigid in that position for two beats, slumping back down like a puppet with its string cut when Neville began to wonder if she would somehow levitate clean off the cot.

Chest heaving, wheezy pants falling from a slack mouth, unfocused eyes slitted open. The familiar, unearthly green filled Neville with awed relief and quite a bit of something that strangely resembled dread.

Blood thudded like a war drum in his ear.

"Heri?" Luna whispered, reaching out again.

Glazed eyes flicked to her. Neville saw something that could have been a smile.

"Oh," Luna gasped, expression twisting. "Oh, no."

Neville couldn't ask what put the look of abject horror on her face — Healers poured into the room, all talking a mile a minute with words that went completely over his head.
"Who was on her vitals?"

"— running a 213 Pith Effusion —!"

"— to the apothecary, fetch the —"

"— limbs unbraced?! Into position! Now!"

"—nd her! Ready the —"

"I'm so sorry," said a Healer urgently, a grimace on his face as he addressed Neville and Luna. His arms were filled with bags of some pale blue liquid. "But this room must be cleared of all non-personnel. Please, wait outside or in the sitting area."

Healers swarming and chattering, Neville ushered the dumbstruck Luna out from the room. With no chairs in the area, he led her to a waiting area not too far away.

"Luna?" he said carefully. He didn't know what to make of her wide eyes and trembling lip.

"Neville!" she breathed, hands coming up to cover her mouth. "Oh, Neville. . . . Sh-she — Oh, gods, she. . . ."

Well and truly spooked, he sat beside her and rubbed her back.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Skittish as he was, Neville still couldn't imagine what could have possibly have occurred in the split second of eye contact that warranted such a reaction.

Luna actually began to cry, head bowed, shoulders shaking. Lost, bewildered, Neville could only continue soothing her as best as he could. This was how the others found the two of them when they finally began trickling in.

"What's happened?" Hermione demanded as she and Sally-Anne exited the lift.

Zacharias had demanded the same not a minute after when he, Hannah, and Ernie Floo'd in with lunch.

Neville didn't know what to tell them; he poorly articulated it the first time he was asked as well.

"She . . ." he began again, "she woke up —"

"Heri?!" Sally-Anne cried, the sentiment being echoed by Hermione. "Heri woke up?!"

"Is there anyone else we know who's been comatose?" snapped Zacharias, though it was obviously half-hearted at best. His face was pinched and tight.

"Yes, well, she had a bit of a fit," said Neville, raising his voice to divert any argument. "Bent her spine damn near in half and squeezed Luna's hand almost to the breaking, but I think we can agree any sort of action is better than nothing. She opened her eyes a sliver after that, but. . . ."

He looked at Luna in askance, not certain how to explain what happened next.

"Well, something weird happened, and then the Healers came in and made us leave," he concluded lamely. "Still checking her over, too, from what I understand."
"Here, Luna," said Ernie, who had been trying to get the girl to drink something since he arrived, "what has got you like this?"

"What did you see?" Hannah asked sharply. Her arms were crossed, head tucked, looking barely leashed as she stared daggers at their weeping friend.

Neville wanted to rebuke her for taking that tone, but he held himself back. Hannah didn't really look like she was in any state to handle any sort of correction.

All eyes fell to Luna.

"She's not in there," she warbled, voice thin and reedy, "not really."

"What do you mean she's not in there?!" thundered Hermione, hysteria creeping into her tone.

A passing Healer frowned at them. Sally-Anne noticed and nudged Hermione with a stern look. Hermione huffed and glared, but pulled herself together.

They prodded Luna for answers, but she proved reticent. Nothing they did could prompt her though they all gamely attempted to do so right up until the Healer who had ejected the two of them originally came to fetch them.

He gave them a weary smile.

"Visitors for Lady Potter-Black?"

They all stuffed themselves into the room, bodily ejecting the lingering Healers via sheer physical mass.

Heri was staring blankly ahead, blinking slowly.

None of them knew what to say, what to do. Hannah had tears dribbling down her chin, clinging to Sally-Anne who was shaking, hands clasped over her mouth.

Neville's mouth was dry. He gulped painfully, his throat aching. The sound was uncomfortably audible in the wordless room.

Heri's head turned at the sound. Her eyes landed on Neville. Those same eyes, so hazy and dimmed before, widened and focused at the sight of him. The most guileless smile broke across her face.

Too bright, too earnest; Neville had never seen such an unburdened look on her face.

"Neville," she sighed, laughing a little. She tried sitting up but immediately fell back.

Ernie, the one closest to the head of the cot, sprang to help. The rest of them flitted around, hovering anxiously. Ernie resettled her as she took in the room again with fresh eyes, like she'd never seen it before, and everyone started talking all at once.

Neville watched, mute, as she smiled and giggled at then, calling out the names of whoever diverted the attention to themselves.

As her eyes slid from Zacharias and moved to Hermione, they landed on Neville again, standing in the back next to the still crying Luna. She beamed at him again and chirped his name.

And he knew then she truly wasn't in there.
On a remote back-road, a sleek city car was zipping pass stretches of sprawling hilly forest. No other car was around — indeed the passengers of this car had not seen another vehicle for at least an hour now.

In the back seat of this car, Allie Torrington blinked open his eyes blearily when he felt them coming to a stop. The hum of the engine cut off as he sat up as best as he could in his booster seat, wriggling his arms out of his blanket.

"Are we there yet?" he asked in his sleepy voice, a yawn erupting out of him as he rubbed his eyes with his fists.

His father was in the driver's seat, still looking forward at . . . Alabaster craned his neck to see what his father was looking at. It looked like a big hill — the biggest they've come across yet.

"Yes, we're here," his father said, turning his head. Alabaster saw the edge of a smile curving his father's cheek up.

Allie eyed the hill dubiously. He turned this way and that, looking out the side windows as well. There wasn't anything around but a bunch of trees!

"I thought I was going to camp?" he said, a whine leaking into his voice.

"You are! It's a special camp, remember? With lots of other kids just like you."

"They see the monsters, too?"

His father didn't reply for a moment. The corners of his eyes tightened.

"That's right, they do," he said eventually, smile back on his face but somehow off. "And there are lots of them that are older and know how to keep everyone safe, too, so they can teach you how to be safe when you're at home as well."

Allie puffed his cheeks out.

"What if Luke comes and I'm not home?"

"Well, Luke knows you'll be here, right? We told him last time he came by that you were going. Luke can come by here if he wants to."

Allie mulled that over as his father got out of the car and came around to unbuckle him as well. Instead of putting him down right away like usual, Allie's father perched Allie on his waist instead, hugging Allie to his body.

"Daddy?" said Allie, a little confused. It wasn't that his father wasn't affectionate, but he made it a point to have Allie walk by himself as much as possible.

His father sighed into his hair.

"It's nothing, little man," he said, pressing a kiss Allie's forehead. "I just miss you already."

They made their way away from the side of the road they had parked and closer to the hill looming ahead of them. As Allie's father walked, a strange feeling puddled in Allie's belly, something he couldn't name. Though it hadn't looked far to begin with, every step closer made it seem like they were moving in slow-motion, like they were trodding knee-deep through a wading-pool of honey.
Allie's father stopped just before the ground inclined up. He frowned up at the top suspiciously.

"Is anyone there?" he called, his voice bouncing through the trees.

A pair of birds that'd been in a nearby flew off in alarm.

There was no other sound after that, no breeze, no animal noises — just their breathing. Allie could hear his heartbeat in his ears.

He must have blinked too slowly or looked away or something, because when Allie's eyes returned to the top of the hill when his father's breath hitched, there was something standing there, looking down at them.

Something that was too tall and had too many legs to be human.

Allie tensed instinctively, his eyes going wide. He smacked his father's shoulder urgently, but his father only shushed him and rubbed his back with a steady hand.

The whatever-it-was — it had the legs of a horse — descended from the hill, its motions calm, unaggressive. Allie wasn't much reassured by that though — there'd been monsters before that tricked him into thinking they were nice.

Allie's father squared his shoulders.

"Are you Chiron?" he asked, his work voice on.

The creature — tall, far taller than Allie's father — smiled at them with its human face.

"I am," it said with a nod. Its eyes fell on Allie. "Here to drop off a child?"

"I was told. . . ." Allie's father paused to swallow. "I was told he could stay here for the summer and I can come get him again when the school year starts?"

"A bit early for summer," it — Chiron — observed, tilting . . . his? — his head. "It's only the second decan of April."

"Yes, well, there was an, um, issue at the Pre-K, and I have to look for a new school now, so. . . ."

Despite Chiron standing there, being all horsey, Allie had trouble keeping interested in the conversation. He didn't like thinking about school — no one believed him when he talked about the monsters, and the picture books had too many words he couldn't read. He ended up inspecting the trees instead. Allie liked trees; sometimes they'd talk to him.

"Well, then!" Chiron said, clapping his hands together, making Allie jump, snapping him out of his daydreaming. "Are you ready to go, young man?"

Allie didn't know what to do. He wrapped his arms around his father's neck and buried his face there.

"Is there maybe someone close to his age around?" he heard his father ask. "Allie's a little shy around adults."

"Ah, that's alright! If you'll wait here, I'll go fetch some campers then. Hopefully, they'll put him more at ease."

The clip-clop of Chiron's hooves was noticeable to Allie now that he wasn't too anxious to pay
attention. The sound was calming for some reason, and Allie didn't notice right away that his father was putting him down until his feet were already touching the ground.

His father crouched down in front of Allie and rested a hand on his shoulder.

"You ready to make some new friends, champ?"

Allie fidgeted with his sleeve him. He'd been excited to come, but now that he was here, it was more than a little scary.

"Hey," said his father, bumping foreheads with him. "It's going to be great! You'll have some friends to play with that understand you. You'll get to hang out and play games all summer until school starts back up! That's going to be lots of fun."

That was true. Allie had been looking forward to meeting people like him, that didn't think he was weird for seeing things they couldn't see.

With Allie feeling a little better, they went back to the car and got Allie's things from the trunk.

His suitcase came first, followed by his backpack, but Allie only had eyes for the thick, furry rectangle growling in the back corner. When she saw him peeping over the edge of the trunk at her, she perked up and waddled forward like the hairiest penguin that ever existed.

"It wouldn't do to forget poor Poof, now would it?" murmured Allie's father, laughing when the living book snorted at him.

Poof blinked all four of her eyes at Allie as he did his best to haul her out of the trunk. This was difficult because she was as squirmy as a cat, half Allie's size, and was, like, two phone books thick, but Allie didn't let that stop him. He gripped her to his front, eyes side out, and teetered back to the hill with his father.

They waited at the base only for a moment before Chiron returned, two people with him.

"What in the name of the gods is that?!" blurted the taller of the two people, a girl with brown hair wearing an orange t-shirt and jeans. She might have been a teenager — Allie wasn't that good with age yet — but the wide-eyed expression on her face made her look especially childish.

Chiron and the other kid — slightly younger than the girl? Maybe just a bit older than Allie? — gaped, but had no words.

Allie ducked behind his father's legs, not liking the reaction. Poof growled warningly in his arms, the sound loud enough that it made her shake.

Allie's father chuckled a bit awkwardly.

"No worries, no worries!" he said, coaxing Allie forward again. "Poof was a gift from this nice young lady from England we had as a babysitter one summer. Heri was her name! Another Half-blood apparently. Left Poof with us to guard Allie when she had to go back for school. I think Poof used to be one of her textbooks? Apparently, there was a class for that. . . ."

"My goodness," said Chiron, regaining his voice. He came closer and peered down carefully. "Is that . . . is that truly a book?"

The girl was called Katie and the boy was Charles; they sputtered and goggled as Chiron soon concluded that Poof counted as a pet and was perfectly fine to join Allie at camp even if she hadn't.
"Alright, champ," said Allie's father, kneeling down to give him a hug. "I'll see you when school starts again."

Allie wasn't happy that his father apparently couldn't go beyond the hill with him, but he girded himself up and didn't complain. Allie was going to be the biggest of big boys now — big boys didn't cry to their daddies over things that couldn't be helped. He made it over the hill and into the camp with Chiron and the other two children without a tear, not even when some mean looking kids came around, ugly looks on their faces.

Besides, Allie had Poof with him now and was allowed to keep her with him at all times, unlike when he was at school. So, even with those mean kids there —

"ARGH! What the FUCK?!!"

— Poof could and would take a bite out of anyone she didn't like.

"Mind your language, young man!" scolded Chiron. He grimaced at the mess. "My goodness —! Katie, show Alabaster to his cabin. You go with them, Charles."

Allie couldn't help but smile as he was herded off away from the bigger boy now bleeding from his hand. He stroked Poof's bloody fur as Katie and Charles kept a careful distance.

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the

DAILY PROPHET

* Wizarding Britain's Premier News Source *

(August 3, 1998)

GODDESS ON THE MOVE

By Taha Akawala

Recent rumours of the release of re-embodied deity the Marchioness of Swetechester — popularly known as Heri Potter, The One Who Died Yet Lives — from St Mungo's Hospital after her extended stay have been the hot topic in courtrooms and drinking halls alike for several months now. What's to come after this blessed resurrection? Would she finally answer the call of the International Confederation of Wizards? What of the talk of the Aurors fast-tracking her through training to have her join their ranks as soon as possible? Would she be off to see her foreign suitor, the illustrious Viktor Krum of the Bulgarian National team? Was there any truth to the notion that she would be appointed to an overseeing position in the ministry, adjacent to the minister himself?

However, none of our whimsy hit upon the true sequence of events unfolding now that she is 100 percent cleared for travel.

Three days ago, on the lady's 18th birthday, her first day out of the hospital, supplicants of her cult swarmed around London in the largest threat of wide-scale breaching of the Statute of Secrecy since November of 1981, after her first triumph over He Whom Must Not Be Named. With her family residence still hidden under the Fidelius Charm, they flooded locations where she has been known to visit in the past, presumably in an attempt to initiate contact. Law enforcement offices and Obliviators were soon on the scene for damage-control, patrolling the streets as discreetly as possible.
When questioned, several petitioners — numerous from other countries — revealed they meant to invite Lady Herakles to take up residence within the temples built in her honour, amongst other things. While all the high adepts present for interview admitted the desire for her to chose their own over others, all agreed they mainly wanted to have a definite location for pilgrimage should she indulge their plea for ceremonial edification.

For two breathless days after that, there was no response, public nor otherwise. Cultists set up camp where they could when what accommodations available locally were filled.

It was only just this morning that a spokesperson — identified as Ms Luna Lovegood, daughter of the editor and owner of The Quibbler, known friend of Heri Potter — made herself available to address the masses.

"Heri is not as she was," Ms Lovegood said when asked about her ladyship. "We are lucky to have had any part of her returned at all. Veneration might improve her — there's no way to tell yet."

When questioned on the possibility of her ladyship taking up residence within one of her temples, Ms Lovegood had this to say:

"That's ultimately up to Heri, but she isn't lucid enough to decide. It's not unlikely though — as I said before, such a thing might improve her state."

There is now talk from the Department of Travel that others of her ladyship's circle were seen talking to staff who handled international travel. Could this be a hint that The One Who Died Yet Lives will be relocating in another nation? Has one of the foreign branches of her cult made an offer too good to refuse?

[Continue on pg. 4]

The late summer day found Neville Longbottom mindlessly tending to his greenhouse, elbows-deep in potting soil. He could not recognize the plant before him, not entirely certain what section of his little haven he was even in. It didn't matter though — he needed the mindlessness of the task.

He feared he was going insane.

Everywhere he went, the darkness of crooks and crannies were deeper than they ought to be. Figures shifted in the corner of his vision. Shadows grew long as he walked by them, his own swelling them, feeding them. And eyes . . . . eyes he could feel but never find prickled his neck when his back was turned.

Even now, in the open, airy structure within the backyard of the estate, under am uncovered sun and idyllic clouds, something moved at the edge of his line of sight, something was staring out at him.

He'd thought it was nothing before. He'd thought it was just stress making his mind act up.

The ring in his pocket felt unbearably heavy. He'd been ever aware of it since it started following him around.

It'd been a whim to put in on that first time. He didn't know why he thought to do so — he didn't even wear his House ring beyond hanging it on a leather strip from his neck.

It was the ring Heri had worn since . . . since fifth-year — no, since before she even left after fourth-year. Heri's cracked stone ring. He couldn't really remember when he'd first noticed it on her, it just seemed like something that belonged there, like the scar on her forehead. It'd sat so innocuously
amongst her House rings, he wouldn't have registered its existence if it hadn't been the ring of which the removal had caused Heri to surge into combustion.

But then he'd put in on.

He'd been fidgeting with it for a while at that point; a few months since the battle at Hogwarts. It was physical proof of Heri's faith in him, that she trusted him with such a monumental task. It was sized to fit Heri, so he slipped it on his little finger, the only finger that fit.

He'd thought the terrible chill that filled him was from knowing the owner was dead.

The odd phenomenons that arose after that weren't overt nor startling, so it took a while for Neville to realise something was off. But when Heri was re-embodied, it grew worse.

A tickling touch brushed against his ankle; cold, almost wet.

Neville kept his breathing measured, side-stepping. He moved to a different spot as if he hadn't noticed.

The ring grew heavier still.

He found his hand moving towards the pocket it was sitting in before he could stop himself, his hand already halfway in. He snatched it away, heart in his throat.

But you want . . .

This wasn't the first time he heard the voice, but it was unwelcomed as ever.

But you want . . .

"I don't want anything, thanks!" he muttered furiously, power-walking over to his Mimbulus mimbletonia. He pulled on the gloves waiting there with what he thought was just the right amount of enthusiasm.

Neville doggedly ignored everything outside of his work with his prized plant, tuning out all sounds, flickers, touches, and urges. He didn't allow himself any thought beyond in response to the fussy specimen in front of him.

He should have known it wouldn't be that simple.

His clippers slipped from his hand when the Mimbulus mimbletonia jiggled in a way he hadn't expected. Cursing, he bent to pick it up off the ground, but then the glove on that hand slid off as well, loosened from the sweat on his skin. Before he could pull back again, his hand shot into his pocket and hooked the ring around his little finger.

Panicked, Neville made to yank it off again, but this time it stuck. It refused to be lifted. Pulling at it was like trying to rip his own skin off.

But that was soon the least of his problems.

A glint of silver, something metallic, flashed. Neville whipped his head up to see a curve of . . . a knife tip? A sharpen wedge of metal hung in the air as if it was thorn caught in cloth.

Before he could blink, it came slashing down, growing as it went, tearing in rent in the fabric of reality. A harvesting scythe emerged from the chasm of an abyss, a hulking, behemoth void of vaguely humanoid shape escaping after it. The echoes of screams followed it — thousands, millions,
all in wordless terror.

Neville wanted to say something — anything — wanted to ask what, why, who? But he already knew. Viscerally, instinctively, Neville knew what he'd unwillingly summoned.

Death.

Death stood in his grandmother's decorative plot of begonias.

"AT LAST," said a voice that came from everywhere, resonating in every part of Neville's body. "YOU'VE MADE ME WAIT, STUBBORN AVATAR."

Neville fainted dead away into a row of budding buttercups.

"What will you do with her?" a quiet voice asked, falling flat in the hush of the room. "What have you done with her already?"

The creak of a body shifting against furniture.

"You ask this yet again?" said another voice, just as soft. "It's unlike you to care so much."

"It's unlike either of us to care," the response was mild but had a pointed undercurrent. "Will you answer me properly this time?"

"She is safe and hidden — that's all you need to know."

"But for how long?"

"Why does that —?"

"For how long, Mother?"

A charged silence. Neither breathed.

The sound of footsteps on stone.

"For as long as necessary."

June 21st, 2006

Imagine the largest concert crowd you've ever seen, a football field packed with a million fans. Now imagine a field a million times that big, packed with people, and imagine the electricity has gone out, and there is no noise, no light, no beach ball bouncing around over the crowd. Something tragic has happened backstage. Whispering masses of people just milling around in the shadows, waiting for a concert that will never start.

If you can picture that, you have a pretty good idea what the Fields of Asphodel looked like.

The black grass had been trampled by eons of dead feet. A warm, moist wind blew like the spirit of a swamp breathing out. Black trees — poplars — grew in clumps here and there. The cavern ceiling was so high above, it might've been a bank of storm clouds, except for the stalactites, which glowed faint gray and looked wickedly pointed. Dotted around the fields were several that had fallen and impaled themselves in the black grass.
Annabeth, Grover, and Percy tried to blend into the crowd, keeping an eye out for security ghouls. Percy couldn't help looking for familiar faces among the spirits of Asphodel, but the dead are hard to look at. Their faces shimmer. They all look slightly angry or confused. They will come up to you and speak, but their voices sound like chatter, like bats twittering. Once they realize you can't understand them, they frown and move away.

The dead aren't scary, Percy concluded. They're just sad.

They crept along, following the line of new arrivals that snaked from the main gates toward a black-tented pavilion with a banner that read:

**JUDGMENTS FOR ELYSIUM AND ETERNAL DAMNATION**

**Welcome, Newly Deceased!**

Out the back of the tent came two much smaller lines.

To the left, spirits flanked by security ghouls were marched down a rocky path toward the Fields of Punishment, which glowed and smoked in the distance, a vast, cracked wasteland with rivers of lava and minefields and miles of barbed wire separating the different torture areas. Even from far away, they could see people being chased by hellhounds, burned at the stake, forced to run naked through cactus patches or listen to opera music.

Percy could just make out a tiny hill, with the ant-size figure of Sisyphus struggling to move his boulder to the top. And he saw worse tortures, too — things he didn't want to think about.

The line coming from the right side of the judgment pavilion was much better. This one led down toward a small valley surrounded by walls—a gated community, which seemed to be the only happy part of the Underworld. Beyond the security gate were neighborhoods of beautiful houses from every time period in history, Roman villas and medieval castles and Victorian mansions. Silver and gold flowers bloomed on the lawns. The grass rippled in rainbow colors. There was laughter and smell barbecue cooking.

Elysium.

In the middle of that valley was a glittering blue lake, with three small islands like a vacation resort in the Bahamas. The Isles of the Blest, for people who had chosen to be reborn three times, and three times achieved Elysium. Immediately, Percy knew that's where he wanted to go when he died.

"That's what it's all about," Annabeth said, echoing Percy's thoughts. "That's the place for heroes."

They left the judgment pavilion and moved deeper into the Asphodel Fields. It got darker. The colors faded from our clothes. The crowds of chattering spirits began to thin.

After a few miles of walking, they began to hear a screech in the distance. A familiar screech.

Looming on the horizon was a palace of glittering black obsidian. Above the parapets swirled three dark bat-like creatures: the Furies. Percy couldn't help but feel the creatures had been waiting for them.

"I suppose it's too late to turn back," Grover said wistfully.

"We'll be okay," said Percy, trying to sound confident.

"Maybe we should search some of the other places first," Grover suggested. "Like, Elysium, for
"Come on, goat boy." Annabeth grabbed his arm.

Grover yelped. His sneakers sprouted wings and his legs shot forward, pulling him away from Annabeth. He landed flat on his back in the grass.


"But I didn't—"

He yelped again. His shoes were flapping like crazy now. They levitated off the ground and started dragging him away from us.

"Maia!" he yelled, but the magic word seemed to have no effect. "Maia, already! Nine-one-one! Help!"

Percy made a grab for Grover's hand but too was late. He was picking up speed, skidding downhill like a bobsled.

Percy and Annabeth ran after him, trying to keep up.

Annabeth shouted, "Untie the shoes!"

It was a sound suggestion but wasn't so easy to do when your shoes are pulling you along feet-first at full speed. Grover tried to sit up, but he couldn't get close to the laces.

They kept after him, trying to keep him in sight as he ripped between the legs of spirits who chattered at him in annoyance.

Percy was certain Grover was going to barrel straight through the gates of Hades' palace, but his shoes veered sharply to the right and dragged him in the opposite direction.

The slope got steeper. Grover picked up speed. Annabeth and Percy had to outright sprint to keep up. The cavern walls narrowed on either side, and Percy realized they'd entered some kind of side tunnel. No black grass or trees now, just rock underfoot, and the dim light of the stalactites above.

"Grover!" Percy yelled, his voice echoing. "Hold on to something!"

"What?" Grover yelled back. He was grabbing at gravel, but there was nothing big enough to slow him down.

The tunnel got darker and colder. The hairs on their arms bristled. It smelled foul down there, a strange combination of things Percy didn't know that could only be described as 'evil.' It made him think of things he shouldn't even know about — blood spilled on an ancient stone altar, the foul breath of a flesh-eater.

Then Percy saw what was ahead of them. He stopped dead in his tracks.

The tunnel widened into a huge dark cavern, and in the middle was a chasm the size of a city block.

Grover was sliding straight toward the edge.

"Come on, Percy!" Annabeth yelled, tugging at his wrist.

"But that's—"
"I know!" she shouted desperately. "The place in your dream! But Grover's going to fall if we don't catch him!"

She was right, of course. Percy booked it down the tunnel once more.

Grover's predicament was dire. He was yelling, clawing at the ground, but the winged shoes kept dragging him toward the pit, and it didn't look like they could possibly get to him in time.

What saved him were his hooves.

The flying sneakers had always been a loose fit on him, and, finally, Grover hit a big rock and the left shoe came flying off. It sped into the darkness, down into the chasm. The right shoe kept tugging him along, but not as fast. Grover was able to slow himself down by grabbing on to the big rock and using it as an anchor.

He was ten feet from the edge of the pit when they caught him and hauled him back up the slope. The other winged shoe tugged itself off, circled around them angrily and kicked at their heads in protest before flying off into the chasm to join its twin.

They all collapsed, exhausted, on the obsidian gravel.

Percy's limbs felt like lead. Even his backpack seemed heavier, as if somebody had filled it with rocks.

Grover was scratched up pretty bad. His hands were bleeding. His eyes had gone slit-pupiled, goat style, the way they did whenever he was terrified.

"I don't know how . . ." he panted. "I didn't . . ."

"Wait," Percy said, going still. "Listen."

He heard something — a deep whisper in the darkness.

Another few seconds and Annabeth said, "Percy, this place—"

"Shh!"

Percy stood.

The sound was getting louder, a muttering, evil voice from far, far below them. Coming from the pit.

Grover sat up.

"Wh-what's that noise?"

Annabeth heard it too, now. Percy could see it in her eyes.

"Tartarus," she breathed. "The entrance to Tartarus."

Percy uncapped Anaklusmos. The bronze sword expanded, gleaming in the darkness, and the evil voice seemed to falter, just for a moment, before resuming its chant.

Percy could almost make out words now, ancient, ancient words, older even than Greek. As if. . .

"Magic," he croaked.
"We have to get out of here!" cried Annabeth.

Together, the two dragged Grover to his hooves and started back up the tunnel. Percy's legs wouldn't move fast enough. His backpack weighed him down. The voice got louder and angrier behind them, and they broke into a run.

Not a moment too soon.

A cold blast of wind pulled at their backs, as if the entire pit were inhaling. For a terrifying moment, Percy lost ground, his feet slipping in the gravel. If they'd been any closer to the edge, they would've been sucked in right away.

They went struggling forward, Grover nearly falling backwards several times because of his hooves' lack of purchase. Panic was setting in, their breathing growing ragged, when —

A force shoved them forward, distinctly warm in contrast to the chilling wind. Propelled with unnatural speed, they finally reached the top of the tunnel, where the cavern widened out into the Fields of Asphodel.

The wind died.

A wail of outrage echoed from deep in the tunnel. Something was not happy we'd gotten away.

"What was that?" Grover panted when they'd collapsed in the relative safety of a black poplar grove. "One of Hades' pets?"

Annabeth and Percy looked at each other. He could tell she was nursing an idea, but she was too scared to share it. That was enough to terrify him.

"And what was that other thing?" Grover continued, throwing a glance back to where they'd escaped. "I wasn't the only one that was all but thrown out, was I?"

Percy swallowed uneasily, capping his sword and putting the pen back in his pocket. They were running out of time; a freak-out would have to wait.

"Let's keep going," he said instead. He looked at Grover. "Can you walk?"

Grover swallowed.

"Yeah, sure. I never liked those shoes, anyway."

He tried to sound brave about it, but he was trembling as badly as Annabeth and Percy were. Whatever was in that pit was nobody's pet. It was unspeakably old and powerful. Even Echidna hadn't given Percy that feeling.

Percy was almost relieved to head back toward the palace of Hades. Anything in comparison felt like a walk in the park now.

Despite himself, Percy looked back to the entrance of the tunnel.

A figure of a girl stood, staring at them blankly.

In the next blink, she was gone.

Chapter End Notes
If you don't know already, I'm on Tumblr! Hit me up at hi-pot-and-news. I post about writing, fandom, talk about my progress occasionally, and answer questions. You can also find my ko-fi link there. *winky face*

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!