Even bars on the window, locks on the door and a demented house-elf can't keep Harry away from his friends. The Ministry hearing, though, might be a different story. And then there's that letter from his dad ... A second year fic.
The gleaming silver car that slowly pulled out of the driveway was filled with three laughing muggles.

The fat walrus that was Vernon Dursley managed to contain himself just long enough for him to stare up from the driver’s side to the second story window of his home. And then, seeing that marvellous sight once more, he roared with laughter, his large grey moustache bouncing erratically every time he opened his mouth.

Beside him, the long bony face of his wife Petunia was bent down close to the dash as she too kept a close eye on that all important window as she giggled with glee. In the back seat, Dudley, their whale of a son, punctuated his ecstatic glee with continuous points.

And it was all due to their having once again gotten something over their supposedly powerful freak of a nephew and cousin.

That ‘freak’ stood stony-faced at his window in the tiniest bedroom of number four Privet Drive. His emerald eyes flashed with anger as he watched his ‘family’ drive off, leaving him locked in his room for the next day or two or however long it was that they ended up being away.

He knew just as well as they did that he could be out of that room in an instant, never mind the bars that now adorned his window or the five overly-large locks arrayed on his bedroom door.

For Harry Potter was a wizard. One wave of his wand, together with an incantation or two would free him. But the consequences of that action would be another letter from the Ministry of Magic about the violation of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction for Underage Sorcery, resulting in his probable expulsion from his beloved Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, or even worse, the snapping of his wand.

Just two days before, coincidently on his twelfth birthday, Harry had received such a letter. The fact that said magic had actually been performed by the strangest creature that Harry’d ever laid his eyes on, a house elf called Dobby, was immaterial. Magic had been performed in front of non-magical muggles and, as he was the only registered magic practitioner in the house, he’d been blamed.

There’d been no quarter given for the fact that he was The-Boy-Who-Lived, one of the most famous wizards in Britain, simply because he hadn’t died when the greatest Dark Wizard in a century, Lord Voldemort had tried to kill him when he was only fifteen months old. Not that anyone really knew what had happened that fateful evening. Lord Voldemort had simply turned up, killed both of Harry’s parents and then, when he tried to kill Harry, the spell had backfired, leaving a scarred Harry behind with no sign of the supposedly vanquished Dark Lord.

But Lord Voldemort hadn’t died that evening. Harry had been forced to face him once more barely six weeks ago and at his school, no less. His Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Quirrel, had turned out to have Lord Voldemort living inside him, visible only as a disembodied face growing out of the back of his head.

After a fairly one-sided duel between Quirrel and Professor Snape which saw the Entrance Hall to the great Castle end up a mess of stone pieces and blast marks, Harry been able to defeat Voldemort again, this time simply with his touch.

But that little house elf had ruined what had been a perfectly tolerable holiday. The Dursley’s hadn’t
known that Harry couldn’t do magic until that fateful letter came. And then all hell broke loose.

Uncle Vernon had spent the previous day in demented glee as he worked away at imprisoning Harry.

First Uncle Vernon had confiscated everything of Harry’s that was even remotely connected to magic: his trunk, his robes, his Nimbus Two Thousand racing broom, all his books, quills, ink and parchment. His owl, Hedwig had been locked into her cage with a brand new padlock. Another five padlocks had gone onto the door of his room. A cat-flap had been installed to allow food to be stuffed through it. And lastly, the bars to his window had been screwed into place.

And then that very morning, Harry’d been startled by the sound of the locks being opened before Uncle Vernon had burst in stating that Vernon’s sister Marge had had a fall and that they were off to the country to see to her. They might be back in a day. Or two. Or not. Vernon’s glee of delight was unparalleled as he stepped back through the door and snapped the locks back into place.

A short time later, the front door had slammed, they’d piled in the car and began to drive off, laughing all the way.

The instant that the silver car was out of sight, Harry’s calm exterior broke.

An anguished cry ripped from his throat, his hands balled into fists at his sides. Suddenly, his fists came up and smashed against the window. The glass wobbled ominously but refused to break.

Spinning around, Harry kicked out at the tiny waste paper basket, sending it sailing across the room to smash into the door. His chair was snatched up and thrown viciously against the wall above his bed, eliciting a loud crack. Leaning forward, he shoved everything on his desk away, scattering pencils, pens, an old notebook and various scraps of paper across his floor.

Another spin brought him face to face with his bed. Reaching down, he grabbed the side of it and heaved, raising it a bare few inches before his strength gave out and it crashed back to the floor.

Still in a rage, Harry stomped across to the door, grasping the handle and rattling it violently before releasing it to punch the solid wood as hard as he could. Ignoring the sting of pain that had erupted, Harry completely lost control as he began kicking and punching the door with everything that he had.

Finally, his anger slowed, he flopped himself down onto the bed and let the tears come. Great ripping sobs burst forth into his pillow, somewhat muffling his cries.

Eventually, the frightened barks of an owl cut through his pain and he lifted his head.

Hedwig, still in her locked cage was ruffling her feathers at him, her large eyes staring unblinkingly at where he lay. Pushing himself up, Harry crossed the room to the cupboard, reached up and stuck his fingers through the cage.

“Sorry, Hedwig,” he said quietly as he stroked the owl’s back, “I’m all done with my tantrum now.”

Letting his hands go limp, he surveyed the ruin of his room. It’d already been messy to start with. Now, it was a complete disaster area. Raising his hands, he ran them through his hair making the black bird’s nest of hair stick out every which way imaginable.

Right at that moment, he couldn’t imagine life being worse than it was. He was locked in a small room. A room in which there was no food, no water, no bathroom and no signs of release for who knew how long. He had no means to contact anyone – the padlock on Hedwig’s cage saw to that.
He had nothing to feed Hedwig with either, when it came to that.

*So much for ‘trust Dumbledore’. Dumbledore will take care of it. Yeah, right. The Headmaster did nothing!* he thought viciously.

Either Professor McGonagall had been lied to or had simply lied to him. Either way, neither his aunt nor his uncle had mentioned being visited by the Headmaster. And life at Privet Drive since he’d arrived had only been marginally better because everyone in the house thought that he could do magic.

*At least Dobby’ll be happy,* he grimaced. *He didn’t want me to go back to Hogwarts, back to my friends. Looks like he got his wish.*

Noticing the streaks of red on his bed sheets, Harry looked down at his hands and groaned. The skin on the back of his hands was ripped and bloodied. And simply looking at them brought the sting and ache in them straight into his consciousness.

Shaking his hands out, he danced around only to groan once more when he saw the state of the wall above his bed. Uncle Vernon was going to kill him. A diagonal crack the length of his arm radiated out from the tiny hole that had obviously been made when he’d thrown the chair against the wall.

Climbing up onto the bed, he peered through the keyhole sized hole. He was just able to make out Dudley’s room beyond the wall. Getting back up, he spun around in a circle, his hands gripping and pulling at his hair. His mind was in whirl, trying to come up with some way to avoid the beating that he knew was coming.

His bed was already two foot out from the wall in his crazy plan to completely rearrange the room so that he could cover the hole with his wardrobe when he stopped. Still hunched over, he raised his eyes and stared at the hole and the cracks surrounding it.

Swivelling his head first one way and then the other, Harry took in the locked door with its tiny cat-flap and then the barred window. This was his prison. Even after school went back, he knew that Uncle Vernon would never let him out. The door and the window were the only two ways out of the room. For now.

An evil grin split his face as he bent to drag the bed further away. The instant that there was enough room, Harry snatched up the chair from where it still lay on the floor and rounded the bed. He braced his feet apart, looked from the wall to the chair and back to the wall again. Then with a determined grimace, he smashed the chair into the wall as hard as he could.

**WHACK!**

He did it again and again and again.

**WHACK! WHACK! CRACK!**

On the third blow, Harry stumbled as one of the chair legs tore right through the wall. Yanking it back out, he dropped the chair and ran his hands gently over the wall before plunging his entire arm through the hole that he’d just made.

Over the next hour, with many breaks to recover his breath and to let his arms have a rest, Harry managed to widen the hole to the point where he could wiggle his entire head and shoulders into the hole. The chair had suffered tremendously. Three of its legs were now scattered on the floor behind him, as well as half of its back.
“Don’t worry, Hedwig, I’ll be right back and then we’ll have you out of there,” Harry told the owl before dropping the remains of the chair and beginning to wiggle through the hole.

He slithered out on top of Dudley’s desk, in the process knocking a large pile of video games to the floor.

Quickly regaining his feet, Harry crossed the room, yanked open the door and rushed out. After a quick stop in the bathroom, he raced down the stairs and into the kitchen. Ignoring the urge to find something to eat, Harry crossed to the back door, only pausing long enough to take the key that hung just inside the door off of its hook.

The small garden shed that hid in the back corner under the juniper tree contained the lawn mower and a small collection of tools. It was here that Harry knew that he could find exactly what he needed. The wire cutters hung in their place on the back wall, while the crow bar rested on a pair of hooks just above the door.

After gathering both tools, Harry raced back to the house. The key and crow bar were dropped unceremoniously on the kitchen table as he raced back towards Dudley’s room, the wire cutters still in his hand.

“All right, Hedwig, let’s get you free,” Harry stated once he emerged back in his own room. The padlock, of course, was too much for the wire cutters, so in accordance with the plan that he’d made while bashing at the wall, he attacked the strands of wire that held the base of the cage in place.

Hedwig stayed perfectly still as Harry worked his way around the cage, not even letting out a single hoot to distract him. Finally, the last wire was cut and Harry dropped the wire cutters. Then, grasping the sides of the cage, he lifted up.

The instant the cage cleared her head, Hedwig spread her wings and flew around the room, soft hoots marking her pleasure.

“I don’t think you really want to hop through that hole, so why don’t you fly out the window and I’ll meet you down in the kitchen,” said Harry.

After stuffing the wire cutters in his back pocket, Harry once more slithered through the hole in the wall and made his way downstairs. There, he grabbed up the crow bar and approached the cupboard under the stairs.

It took some tapping, but Harry was eventually able to get the crow bar into the tiny space between the padlock and the latch that locked the cupboard shut. Then, with a small jump, he forced the bar down with all of his strength. The entire latch popped off and shot across the hallway before crashing to the ground.

With a mad grin, Harry pulled the door open. Against the far wall sat his old battered trunk, filled with everything that belonged to him. Everything that is, except for his Nimbus Two Thousand, which lay haphazardly across its top.
A tall, thin man emerged from the wooden door to stand on the front porch of his Crawley house and stretched. One hand fell to rub the back of his neck behind his slightly greying brown hair and, not for the first time in recent weeks, he realised that he was well and truly overdue for a haircut.

He padded down the three steps and across the path that neatly divided the front lawn in two. Small red flowers dotted the deep green hedge just inside the fence right up to the ivy covered arch that bordered the gate. To the left of that gate, his morning paper had been wedged between two palings, as had been the habit of the boy who delivered it for the past couple of years.

As Dan Granger turned to retreat to his house, he allowed the paper to unfurl so that he could read the morning’s headlines. But a strange sight took the paper straight out of his mind.

A dark lump lay on the small swing-seat on the extreme left of the porch, almost hidden in the shade of the surrounding bushes. Letting the arm that held the paper drop to his side, Dan slowly walked back up the path, his gaze firmly attached to the unusual sight.

A flash of white caught his attention and he realised that a beautiful white owl was perched protectively on the back of the swing. An owl that he’d come to know well.

“Hedwig?” he muttered.

And then he looked more closely at the lump. A shock of unruly black hair told him that the lump was a person. The skewed glasses perched on the sleeping face of the boy identified him. Dan paused, allowing his gaze to sweep over this person that he’d only ever heard about.

His clothes were old and tattered. The shoes that peeked out from the overly large jeans looked to be more duct-tape than leather. A flash of dried blood on one knuckle had Dan scowling, but for now, he was reserving judgement. And on the ground just under the swing, were a pair of canvas bags and a broomstick.

Slowly, quietly, Dan started walking once more. Stepping back inside the house, he closed the door behind him with a click. After dropping the paper on the sideboard, he sighed and walked towards the staircase.

A bushy-haired girl in purple silk pyjamas, still rubbing the sleep from one eye was descending towards him.

“Morning, Daddy,” Hermione yawned.

“Morning, dear,” Dan replied and then, “Hermione, I think that there’s something of yours out on the porch.”

She stopped to look at him, her head cocked quizzically.

“Go on,” he said, stepping aside.

He watched as his daughter walked towards the door, looking back at him on every other step, her lip caught between her teeth. A pair of arms reached around him from behind and he leant back.

“Dan?” Emma asked.
Dan sighed once more. “Just wait.”

He saw the door pulled open and Hermione stick her head out looking first one way and then the other. And then it came, just as he’d imagined.

“HARRY?” Hermione squealed.

-oOoOo-

“HARRY?”

Hermione’s high pitched squeal startled Harry awake. He jerked, causing the swing to move backwards and toppling him awkwardly to the ground. Thankfully, his landing was cushioned by the soft folds of the invisibility cloak that must have fallen off of him sometime during his restless sleep.

A solid thump hit him, knocking him over further before a pair of arms had wrapped themselves around him.

“Oh, Harry, I’m so sorry! Are you alright?”

Nodding into her bushy hair, he wrapped his own arms around her.

“Hey, Hermione.”

Hermione pulled back and he saw her chocolaty eyes roaming all over his face. “What are you doing here?”

Harry sighed as he settled his glasses more properly onto his nose. “That’s a long story, Hermione.”

“Let him up, dear and bring him inside,” a deep voice interrupted.

Harry looked up past Hermione’s shoulder to see a tall man smiling crookedly at the two of them.

“Oh, of course,” Hermione smiled, grabbing hold of Harry’s hands and pulling him up with her. “Come on, Harry.”

Snatching up his invisibility cloak, which he promptly stuffed into one of the overlarge pockets of Dudley’s old jeans, and then his broom, Harry made to follow her. The strange man, who he assumed was Hermione’s father, had already picked up his two bags. Hedwig soared past to glide through the open door before them.

A brief flash of white was all that Harry saw of his faithful friend before she disappeared around a nearby corner and through a door deeper into the house that she obviously knew well.

Hermione’s insistent tug barely gave him any time to take in much of the entryway that they breezed through. The impression that he got was that Uncle Vernon would approve of the house. The Granger’s were obviously well off, with distinctly upmarket types of furnishings evident. The walls were a rich cream colour that made the dark wooded sideboard stand out in the entryway, as well as the ornate mirror and the large oil painting of some sort of countryside.

That elegant feel continued into the living room that Hermione dragged him into, although here, it was softened by the homey qualities of copious amounts of pictures and shelves full of knick-knacks that Harry’d love to examine. Instead, he found himself pushed down onto the dark blue lounge chair, Hermione right beside him.

Hermione’s father had followed them in accompanied by Mrs Granger, who he remembered from
King’s Cross Station.

“Here, Harry, let me take that,” Mr Granger said, reaching for his broom.

He watched wide-eyed as it was leant carefully, almost reverentially, against the wall beside his bags.

“I’m Mister Granger, by the way. It’s nice to finally meet you, Harry,” he said, coming back with a hand outstretched.

“Hi,” Harry said nervously, shaking his hand.

“How’d you get here, Harry? Did your family drop you off,” Mrs Granger frowned.

Harry shook his head but before he could even start to explain, Hermione gasped in horror.

“You didn’t fly here, did you, Harry?”

Harry grinned at her sheepishly. “Yeah, I did.”

“But what if you were seen?” she asked, smacking him on the arm.

“Hermione!” Mrs Granger admonished.

“Don’t worry, Hermione, I wore my invisibility cloak,” Harry reassured his friend.

“Invisibility cloak,” Mr Granger piped up, his face lit up with interest. “Cool. Can we see it?”

After a shared look of confusion with Hermione, Harry dug it out of his pocket before throwing it over the two of them.

“That’s absolutely amazing!” Mr Granger exclaimed. “Where can I get one of them?”

“They’re really rare and really valuable,” Hermione explained, pulling the cloak off of her head. “This one belonged to Harry’s dad.”

“Would you mind making yourselves fully visible again?” Mrs Granger asked.

Harry pulled off the cloak and stuffed it back into his pocket.

“What are you doing here, Harry? Won’t your Aunt and Uncle be worried?” Hermione asked.

Harry snorted. “They don’t even know I’ve gone.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “What’ve you done, Harry?”

Harry eyed both of his best friend’s parents nervously before turning to Hermione. He really wasn’t sure how much to say. Running away, especially after the damage to the house that he’d caused, was definitely the best decision that he’d ever made. All he needed to do was to find some way to convince Hermione of that. And now her parents as well.

“Things haven’t been … good at my Aunt and Uncle’s,” he began cautiously.

Hermione’s eyes were mere slits as she pursed her lips at him. “What do you mean, Harry?”

“They … ah, they found out that I can’t do magic at home and then things got … bad. So they decided to … to find a way to stop me from … to stop me from going back to Hogwarts, so I, ah, I ran away,” he finished in a near whisper.
“But what about Professor Dumbledore?” Hermione asked. “Wasn’t he supposed to go and talk to them?”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, that’s what McGonagall said. Didn’t happen.”

“Professor McGonagall, Harry,” Hermione corrected. “But I was sure …”

“Yeah, so was I,” Harry agreed. “Either Professor McGonagall lied to me or Dumbledore lied to her!”

“Perhaps Professor Dumbledore simply forgot.”

Harry snorted in disbelief again, letting Hermione know his thoughts on that idea.

“What do you mean that things ‘got bad’?” Mrs Granger asked suspiciously.

“They gave me extra chores, locked me in my room,” he shrugged and then, after a glance at Hermione, he added an extra that he thought might work in his favour. “They took away all my Hogwarts stuff so that I couldn’t do my homework.”

Beside him, Hermione gasped and it was all that Harry could do to suppress a laugh.

“I assume that your Aunt and Uncle are home right now,” Mr Granger asked darkly.

“No. My Aunt Marge, that’s Uncle Vernon’s sister, had a fall so they’ve gone off to visit her.”

Mr and Mrs Granger shared a look before turning back to Harry.

“How long with they be gone?”

Harry shrugged. “Uncle Vernon wasn’t sure. A day or two, probably.”

“Harry, you said that your Aunt and Uncle found out that you can’t do magic away from Hogwarts. I take it that you didn’t tell them?” Hermione asked.

“Of course I didn’t, Hermione! They wouldn’t come near me when they thought that I could turn them into a toad or something. There was no way that I was going to wreck the good thing I had going!”

“Then how’d they find out?” Hermione persisted.

“It was that demented house-elf, Dobby,” he began.

“House-elf?” Mrs Granger asked.

“I think that they’re sort of like a servant. Or maybe a slave. Dobby did keep trying to hurt himself for betraying his master,” Harry mused.

“That’s barbaric!” Hermione scowled.

“Tell me about it,” Harry replied. “Anyway, the other night, Dobby turned up and tried to make me promise not to go back to Hogwarts. He’d even been taking all of my mail to try to make me think that I didn’t have any friends …”

“Is that why you haven’t been writing this summer?” Hermione broke in.
Harry nodded before continuing. “And when I said that nothing was going to stop me from going back, he levitated a cake and dropped it right on the heads of some people my Aunt and Uncle had over. That’s when I got a letter about breaking the Decree for Underage Magic.”

“But didn’t you just say that the house-elf did it?” Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. “Yeah, but because I was the only registered magic user in the house, they thought that I did it.”

“That’s grossly unfair. We’ll need to challenge that and get it wiped from your record,” Hermione stated firmly.

Harry simply shrugged, not willing just then to tell her that he thought that it was a waste of time.

“And because of that, your relatives have been abusing you?” Mr Granger asked dangerously.

Harry nodded cautiously, not sure where he was going to go with that question.

“I know what you’re thinking, Dan and while I agree with you wholeheartedly, I’m not sure how much we can do. Remember that we’re leaving for France tomorrow,” Mrs Granger stated.

Mr Granger frowned and dropped his head, deep in thought.

“Harry, where’s your school trunk?” Hermione asked quietly.

“ Couldn’t fit it on my broom,” Harry explained, “so I left it behind and used those bags instead. It was pretty old and banged up anyway. I’ll get a new one in Diagon Alley later.”

Suddenly, Mr Granger’s head came up and pierced Harry with an intense look in his eye.

“Harry, we are going to help you. I promise you that. And if it wasn’t for this trip which we can’t get out of, then there’s a lot that we’d be doing over the next few days. As it is, we’ll do what we can today to get the ball rolling, but until we get back, you’re either going to have to go back to your Aunt and Uncle’s or …”

But Harry didn’t wait to hear anything else. He’d already heard enough. He’d been sure that Hermione would help him. How, he had no idea. But this … no. He was up and pacing without even realising it.

“No. I won’t go back. And there’s no way that they’d take me back anyway. Not after what I did to their house.” He ran a hand through his hair, looking wildly around at the room, no longer seeing either Hermione or her parents. “I … I’d rather give up my magic than spend another night at Privet Dive with the Dursleys!”

A blinding flash of light erupted from the wand that he hadn’t even realised that he’d taken out of his back pocket.

Harry spun around, wide-eyed. His eyes sought out Hermione’s only to see the same horror-stricken face that he imagined was on his own.

“Oh, Harry, what have you done?” Hermione moaned.

“What was that?” Mr Granger asked.

Hermione rose uncertainly to her feet, marched across the room and placed both hands on Harry’s shoulders.
“You need to calm down, Harry,” she stated, staring intently into his eyes.

Swallowing nervously, Harry nodded.

“What was that, Hermione?” he asked worriedly.

“I think that you just made a wizard’s vow,” she sighed.

“Oh, hell,” Harry muttered.

“Harry! Language!” Hermione admonished.

“Sorry,” Harry said, tearing away from her and throwing himself at his bags.

Luck was with him. The first one that he opened was the one that he needed. Snatching out a piece of parchment, a quill and some ink, he spun around and saw the tiny end table. Rushing over, he fell to his knees, unscrewed the lid to the ink bottle and started writing.

_Dear Madam Hopkirk,_

_My name is Harry Potter. You would have detected a wizard’s vow being made at the home of Hermione Granger in Crawley at …_

Here he swung around to find a clock on a mantle.

_ten past seven this morning. This vow was made accidentally by me not by Hermione Granger, at whose house I am currently visiting._

_Regards, Harry Potter._

“Hedwig!” he called, rolling up the parchment and sealing it.

A flash of white appeared from around the corner and his owl landed on the arm of the chair in front of him.

“I need you to take this straight to The Ministry of Magic and give it to someone in the department for the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction for Underage Sorcery,” he instructed as he tied the parchment to Hedwig’s leg.

With a soft hoot and a quick nip of his finger, Hedwig launched herself up and back the way that she’d come.

“Harry? What was that about?” Hermione asked, staring at him.

“I performed magic, Hermione. That means that that it would have been detected in the Ministry,” Harry explained. “So I sent a letter explaining that it was me that did it, not you.”

“Oh,” Hermione replied, understanding dawning. “But that means that you’ll get a second letter. How much trouble are you going to be in?”

Harry shook his head. “Dunno.”

They were interrupted just then by the arrival of a large eagle owl that swooped around the room before dropping an official looking letter on Hermione’s head.

“Looks like you were right,” she stated as she opened her letter. “They think that I did it.”
“What’s going on, you two?” Mrs Granger asked looking between them.

“Harry performed magic and the Ministry of Magic detected it. But because it was performed here, they think that I did it. This,” Hermione explained, waving the letter around, “is a warning for breaking the restriction for underage sorcery. But Harry’s already fixed it. He sent Hedwig to tell them that it was him and not me.”

Harry could see the conflict on his friend’s face. Her concern for him was being overshadowed by the smile of pride that was threatening to break through.

“Thank you, Harry, that was a very responsible thing for you to do,” Mr Granger said, standing up to clap him on the shoulder.

Harry smiled weakly, somewhat glad for the three owls who suddenly swooped into the room, saving him from replying. Hedwig flew straight to his shoulder, nipping his ear in greeting. One of the eagle owls dropped a second letter on Hermione’s head, while the other owl dropped a letter at Harry’s feet.

In unison, Harry and Hermione ripped open their letters.

“It’s alright,” Hermione sighed. “They accepted your letter Harry, I’m not in trouble at all.”

Harry grimaced and nodded at her.

“I know,” he stated grimly. “But this is my second letter for breaking the Decree for Underage Sorcery. I’ve been summoned to a hearing on August Twenty-nine. They’ll decide whether or not to expel me from Hogwarts then. Or if they should simply snap my wand.”
Chapter 3

The instant that the car pulled to a stop, Emma Granger was out the door. Glancing around, she noted that, at this still early hour, Charing Cross Road was yet to fill up. Only a small number of cars were parked near the old store front that she knew hid the entrance to a magical pub that in turn led to the magical shopping alley known as Diagon Alley.

Both Harry and Hermione had also exited the car, both moving around to the trunk. Emma bustled around after them and bit her lower lip as she waited for them to retrieve Harry’s bags and broom.

“Now, Harry, we’ll be back on the nineteenth,” she stated, holding his green eyes on her brown ones purely by the force of her will. “As soon as we’re back, we’ll get together and work something out, alright?”

He nodded, which was better than could have been expected barely two hours previously.

“To Gringotts and then straight to Neville’s,” Hermione stated firmly, capturing one of his hands in hers.

“I know the plan, Hermione,” he stated and Emma could hear the exasperation and what sounded like a touch of annoyance in his voice.

“You will be careful and look after yourself, won’t you, Harry?” Hermione asked.

This time he smiled at his friend, “of course, Hermione.”

A flash of white and the flap of wings startled Emma for a second before she saw Hedwig taking up her spot on her master’s shoulder. Harry raised a hand and stroked the owl’s breast before turning back to her.

“Thanks for breakfast and for bringing me here,” he said.

“You’re very welcome, Harry,” she replied.

“You’re very welcome, Harry,” she replied.

“Have a nice … ah, conference in Paris,” he smiled before turning once more to Hermione. “You, too, Hermione. Have a great holiday.”

“I will, Harry,” she smiled sadly. “See you when we get back.”

With a nod, Harry picked up his bags with one hand and his broom with the other before heading towards the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron.

It wasn’t until she was buckling her seatbelt once more that Emma realised that her daughter was still standing on the sidewalk watching her friend walk away.

“She’s going to fret the whole time we’re away, isn’t she?” she asked quietly.

A heavy sigh and a nod from her husband was her only answer.

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Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore peered at himself in the full-length mirror that he was standing in front of over his half-moon glasses. A final wave of his wand over his beard to ensure that it was sitting correctly and he nodded.
He considered his deep blue robes with the flashing yellow stars and moons the perfect choice for his upcoming ‘meeting’ with the Weasley twins. The two overly-excitable red-heads always responded well to flashy theatrics and, if he could woo them to his way of thinking with a simple outfit, then it was all for the good.

Plucking up the bag of his ‘special’ lemon sherbets, he hid them away in an inner pocket of his robe. *When all else fails* ..., he thought with a twinkle in his eye.

It’d been nearly seven weeks since term finished. By now, he knew, young Harry Potter would be clamouring to return to the wizarding world and the Weasley twins were the perfect way for him to do so. They weren’t his original plan. No, young Ronald was supposed to fill the role of friend, brother and confidante to the boy. But the twins would do in a pinch. Just as long as they get him to the Burrow and under the influence of Molly.

Albus considered the Weasleys to be one of the more promising parts to the plan that he’d been cultivating all of these years. Molly, he knew, would mother the boy. Arthur, with his job at the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts would provide a conduit between the boy’s two worlds. All of the boys would provide the family that he so desperately craved. And then there was young Ginerva. Albus had great plans for the boy where she was concerned. He smiled to himself, knowing how little it took to guide them all down the path that he’d chosen for them.

As he emerged from his private chambers, he paused at the odd sight of a large eagle owl perched on the back of his chair. Usually owls sent to him knew to wait outside on the window ledge for him to allow them entry.

Quickly, he crossed the room and relieved the bird of its message, shooing it off as quickly as he could. He eyes scanned the message once, then twice. Slowly, he allowed himself to sink into his chair. A scowl appeared on his face as he read the message a third time. This, he knew, would need some thinking about and some decisive planning.

It seemed that young Mister Potter had gotten himself into trouble. Not one, but two breaches of the Decree for Underage Sorcery meant that the boy was required to appear before a hearing. Dumbledore had no concerns about the boy being expelled from Hogwarts. If even the Headmaster of The-Boy-Who-Lived was willing to speak up for him, then nothing would make that happen.

No, it was more the fact that Harry had been summoned to the Ministry of Magic that had him concerned. Ever since the incident with Quirrel, Amelia Bones had been pestering him to allow her access to the boy. His scowl deepened at the thought of the Head of the Magical Law Enforcement. She could be quite tenacious and it had been all that he could do to deny the boy to her. He’d finally reached the point where he was sure that she’d given up on talking to young Harry.

But his appearance in the Ministry would completely change that. One whiff of the boy and she’d have him whipped off to her department and pumped full of questions that Dumbledore certainly didn’t want asked, let alone answered.

As his brain turned the problem over, the message once more caught his eye and caused his heart to stutter. Harry had supposedly made a wizard’s vow at Miss Granger’s residence. For the life of him, he couldn’t understand how that could have happened. Mister Potter should be firmly seconded in the house of his Aunt and Uncle.

Swivelling his chair to the side, he examined the myriad of silver objects that decorated a small table sitting against the wall. No, all were working perfectly. There had obviously been some mistake. The tracking charm that he’d discretely placed on Harry’s trunk indicated that he was still at home.
If the Ministry had made a mistake, then perhaps there was no reason for the boy to go anywhere near Madam Bones. With a sharp nod of his head, Dumbledore stood and made his way towards his fireplace.

-oOoOo-

Guilt racked through Harry as he entered the Leaky Cauldron.

When he’d left the Dursleys late the night before (or was that early this morning? He really wasn’t sure, not having looked at a clock), he’d had one destination in mind – Hermione. Really, there was no logic to it. Crawley wasn’t even in the general direction of Diagon Alley, the place that he knew that he’d end up. All Harry’d known was that he needed to see his best friend. He knew that she’d help him no matter what.

And the very last thing that he’d just done was lie to her. Taking a hard swallow, Harry pushed on towards the back of the pub.

He’d hated lying, but he didn’t know what else to do. She’d been so insistent that he needed to stay with someone and, as she and her parents were going to be out of the country, Neville had been her logical choice.

But Harry’d had enough of trusting the adults for now. The Dursleys were never to be trusted. Dumbledore blatantly lied about sorting out his home life. And either McGonagall had lied to him or she was too naive and trusted the wrong person blindly.

During that long cold midnight flight, he’d come up with a plan. Step one was to get to Gringotts. He had plenty of money in that vault of his. He’d use some of it to find somewhere where he could stay for the rest of the holidays. It didn’t matter whether it was a magical place or a muggle place. Simply somewhere where he didn’t have to worry about people imprisoning him would be enough.

Step two, coincidentally enough, he thought could also be achieved at Gringotts. That amazing gift that Hermione had given him at King’s Cross had some of the information that he needed. Gringotts should help to clarify it.

*Magical Peers: The Ancient and Most Noble Houses of Britain, revised edition* by Ephaniah Gimble had three full pages on the House of Potter. It was supposedly one of the top ten richest Houses in Britain. Or at least it was when the book was published fifteen years ago. And there were a lot of houses, businesses, land and even an island that all belonged to the Potters. Gringotts, Harry was sure, would have a record of where they all were. He fully intended to claim one and live in it as soon as possible.

The steps after that depended on what he found out at Gringotts, although he had a piece of parchment nearly two foot long full of items that he wanted to buy.

Finding himself unexpectedly confronted with a set of thick, white marble stairs, Harry looked up. Towering above him soared the majestic building that was Gringotts. It gleamed white in the morning sun, almost blinding him with its brilliance.

Hefting his bags and brooms, he whispered for Hedwig to wait for him and boldly stepped forth to climb the short steps.

Harry nodded politely to the goblin that stood guard at the door, a large and very sharp sword clenched in his hands.

The inside of the building was filled with rich counters of dark wood. A dozen high narrow
windows allowed shafts of light to stream in. Four chandeliers, nearly as big as his bed back at the Dursleys, hung from the high roof.

Looking around, Harry caught sight of a free teller and made his way across to stand in front of the high counter. The goblin that sat there looked old and cranky. An elaborate monocle that looked something like a miniature telescope was stuck in one eye as he carefully examined a glittering yellow jewel.

Not wanting to interrupt the goblin’s concentration, Harry stood as still as he could, his bags placed carefully at his feet, his broom leaning against the counter. Finally, after what felt like hours, but was actually closer to a little over five minutes, the goblin placed the gem in a tray. The tray quickly disappeared underneath the counter at the same time that the monocle was placed in a pocket of the goblin’s vest.

“What?” the goblin barked suddenly, looking at Harry with intense black eyes.

Harry started, but quickly regained control and settled to standing quietly under that piercing gaze. “Um, sorry to bother you, Sir, but I was wondering if I could be taken down to my vault?”

The goblin continued to stare, his eyes seeming to narrow slightly as he bared his incredibly sharp, pointed teeth.

“Key, please,” the goblin instructed, stretching out a long-fingered hand.

“Um,” Harry replied nervously, knowing that this was the one sticking point to his entire plan, “um, I don’t actually have my key.”

“Where is it?” the goblin hissed.

“Um, I think that Hagrid, Rebeus Hagrid I mean, has it. I came with him last year, but he never gave it to me after we visited my vault,” Harry tried to explain.

The goblin glared at him. “That was very foolish to give away your key. A new one can be made, but it will cost you.”

“That’s fine,” Harry quickly replied.

A small shallow bowl suddenly appeared on the counter-top.

“Hand,” the goblin commanded, holding out his own.

That was until he saw the large knife that appeared in the goblin’s hand.

“Hey! What …?” he protested, desperately trying to pull his hand back out of the strong grip that the goblin had on him.

A scowl of annoyance crossed the goblin’s face.

“I need a sample of your blood to confirm your identity,” he growled.

Gulping hard, Harry nodded.

The knife flashed towards his thumb, stinging it sharply. A pair of long fingers gripped the thumb and squeezed, allowing seven drops of blood to fall into the bowl. Then, with a wave of the goblin’s
hand and a low mutter, the cut was healed.

Harry peered interestingly into the bowl. Nothing seemed to happen for the longest time and then, with an intense flash of light, two small gold keys and the outline of a third appeared. Even as he watched the outlined key slowly faded away to be replaced by a piece of parchment with charred edges.


“What?” a confused Harry asked. “I thought that I only had one vault.”

The goblin shrugged as he plucked the two keys out of the bowl. “You own three vaults, but are only eligible for two. Here are your keys and the readout.”

“Thank you,” he replied and then, “I'm sorry about trying to pull my hand away. I just didn’t understand.”

The goblin cocked his head at him, his eyes narrowed. “You are indeed a strange wizard Harry Potter.”

Unsure what to make of that, Harry decided to simply nod. “Um, can I have someone show me down to my vaults? And maybe talk to someone about any properties that I own?”

The goblin waved towards the area that Harry knew the entrance to the Gringotts Carts were stored. A new goblin promptly trotted over towards them.

“Snagtooth will show you to your vaults. You may make an appointment to talk to your account manager when you return.”

“Thank you, Sir, for all your help,” Harry said before turning to the new goblin. This one looked a lot younger and seemed as though he wasn’t going to be as cranky as the teller.

“What vault, please?” Snagtooth asked.

“Um, I’d like to visit two. Vaults 502 and 687,” Harry replied.

“Which would you like to visit first?” Snagtooth asked.

Curiosity about this new ‘Investment Vault’ made that decision easy. “Vault 502, please.”

“This way, please,” he was instructed.

Harry followed Snagtooth to the first available cart and, after setting himself and his bags and broom in the bottom of it, they were off. It was just as he remembered. Incredibly fast with more twists, turns and drops than a roller-coaster. Harry loved every second of it, his face splitting into a wide grin. All too soon, they stopped outside of a circular iron door only slightly larger than the goblin.

“Key, please,” Snagtooth asked.

Looking at the two keys in his hand, Harry noticed small golden numbers etched into the top of each one. Picking out the one with ‘502’ on it, he handed it to the goblin. Snagtooth immediately walked to the door and ran a single large nail down the centre of it, making a tiny keyhole appear. Then, after inserting the key, a loud thunk indicated that it was unlocked.
Snagtooth pulled the door wide to a shocked Hary. A massive pile of gold shone brightly in his eyes reflected off of the torches that sprung to life around the vault. Harry stepped forward and looked around.

The vault was smaller than his Trust Vault as far as he could remember, but the amount of gold looked to be about the same. Most of it was in golden galleons, although there were small piles of silver sickles and bronze knuts to either side.

And then something unusual caught his eye. Just inside the door, half-hidden by the where the door hinged outwards, stood a small wooden podium. A large, thick folder lay on top of it. Stepping forward, Harry cautiously opened it to find a sheaf of papers. But on top was something that froze his eyes.

A letter.

On the front was his name, Harry, in large, scratchy letters. And up in top left corner, the Potter crest was embossed with a name underneath.

The name of his father: James Potter.
Harry stared at the letter in his hand. It had him transfixed. Half of him wanted nothing more than to rip it open and read it over and over and over again. The other half was still too dazed to think that he had something that his dad had actually touched, something with his very handwriting sitting in his hand. Whatever way he looked at it, the letter was momentous.

Around him, the few birds that chirped in the small park that he’d stumbled across down one of the side streets of Diagon Alley continued their merry tune. The numerous trees and shrubs swayed gently in the soft breeze. The grass under him felt soft. But none of it registered.

A soft hoot in the nearest tree brought unseeing eyes up. What could have been the second or even the twentieth hoot finally brought him out of his stupor.

“You’re right, Hedwig,” Harry said softly. “I’ll never know if I don’t open it.”

Turning the envelope over, he carefully slipped a finger under the flap and began to ease it open. He winced slightly as one corner tore. Finally, with trembling hands, Harry pulled out a couple of sheets of parchment.

The writing, like that on the envelope, was somewhat messy, not unlike Harry’s own, he reflected.

_My dearest Harry,_

_I guess that this is one letter that you never have to read, but I’m writing it anyway, son, just in case. We live in uncertain times and the future, for the most part, looks bleak._

_That bleakness is, of course, out there. Not in here where your Mother is making us her famous shepherd’s pie or in here where you’re currently sitting at my feet, begging me to let you ride your new toy broom that your Uncle Sirius gave you for your birthday._

_No, in here in this little cottage, the world is perfect. Everything that your Mother and I ever wanted is here. Our little family. Together we’re so very, very happy._

_But unfortunately, beyond these four walls, the world is at war. Which is why I’m writing this letter. Just in case._

_If something has happened to both your Mother and I, I know that your godparents and your Uncle Moony and even your Uncle Peter will make sure that you’re loved and cared for, just the way that we would._

_But I’d like to do more for you._

_By the time that you read this (a time that I really, really hope never comes to pass), you’ll have started at Hogwarts. You’ll already know about your trust vault that we’ve set up for you for your schooling._

_Eventually when you come of age, you’ll inherit the Potter title and gain access to the Potter vault. That’ll be a lot of money and a lot of responsibility, even for a seventeen year old. So, I’m going to do for you what my father did for me._

_I’ve set up for you an Investment Vault at Gringotts. Just like your Education Vault, it has a hundred thousand galleons deposited in it. But unlike your Education Vault which will get topped up each
year on September 1, the hundred thousand in your Investment Vault is it. No extra money at all. I’ve also included the deeds to a building in Diagon Alley.

With this money and building, your job is to learn how to invest wisely. Learn all of the ins and outs of business that you can. Find everyone who you trust implicitly to advise you, but overall, these decisions will be yours. Your Uncle Sirius and Uncle Remus, as well as the goblins, will all be able to steer you well. Your Uncle Peter never did have a head for money, so you probably want to shy away from his advice.

I’d like to think that you’ll invest well and wisely, but, if you happen to make some mistakes, learn from them. I know that I made my fair share, so you’ll be in excellent company. And if everything goes pear shaped, then the goblins will use the Potter Vault to settle any debts and make sure that the building doesn’t need to be sold off, however you won’t get a second chance at this until you come of age.

If you’re anything like your Mum, then I know that you’ll succeed splendidly with whatever venture you set your mind to.

I know that this is a lot of responsibility to thrust on you, so my last piece of advice for you is to have some fun with it, listen to your heart as well as your head and don’t stress over it.

I love you, Harry and I reckon I’m the proudest dad in the world. Always remember that.

Dad.

Harry’s eyes lost the ability to see the paper as he read the last word. Tears filled his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. His dad loved him and was proud of him. They were words that he’d longed to hear his entire life.

Finally, he was able to dash the tears from his eyes and look at the letter once more. Ever so carefully, he flattened it out where his hand had scrunched one side.

After reading it again, a number of questions flashed through his mind, all clamouring for an answer. His grandparents did the same thing for his dad? What happened to them? What should he invest in? There was a building somewhere in Diagon Alley that he owned? A hundred thousand galleons was an awful lot of money. How much is that in muggle money? What did he know about businesses?

His dad had said to get advice. He had no idea how hard that was going to be. Sirius was in prison – something that Harry was still desperate to find out more about. Remus probably thought that he didn’t want to talk to him anymore considering Dobby had been keeping their letters from each other. Even Peter was a lost cause – for some reason, owls couldn’t seem to deliver any letters to him, instead they kept trying to give the letters to Ron Weasley.

The goblins, though, might be his best bet. Apparently, he had an account manager. He hadn’t spoken to him yet, being too focused on the letter in his hand. Originally, he’d wanted to talk to a goblin about a Potter property to find somewhere to live …

His thoughts trailed off as he once again stared at his dad’s letter. In a flash, he dove for the folder that came with the letter. Rifling through it, he came across the deeds to the building in Diagon Alley.

It took him a number of times of reading it through to puzzle out the legal jargon, but eventually, he found that he owned the building that housed shops 93 and 95 on Diagon Alley. What businesses were currently there, he had no idea. But finally he had a destination in mind. Maybe, just maybe,
he’d found somewhere to live for the rest of the holiday.

After a short debate with himself, Harry decided that the rest of the parchment in the folder could wait. For now, the most important thing that he needed was some place to stay. Carefully folding the letter, he slid it away into its envelope before both it and the folder went into one of his bags. All he kept out was the parchment stating that he owned the building.

Then, with bags and broom in hand, he set off back towards Diagon Alley.

Reaching the intersection, Harry looked around. Witches and wizards wandered the streets, all intent on their business. He ignored them all though, desperately trying to determine how to work out the numbers of the shops. Each shop that he could see had their name prominently displayed either in fancy lettering across the window, a hanging shingle out in front or flashing multi-coloured letters emblazoned above their shop.

Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop, Potage’s Cauldron Shop, TerrorTours and Twillfit and Tatting’s were the closest to him, so he focused in on them. Of course, the window of Gambol and Japes proved a bit too much of a distraction and it was only after he’d perused every amazing item that he could see in the window and mentally added some of those things to the list of items that he wanted to buy that he remembered what he was looking for.

And then, in tiny bronze numerals above the door of TerrorTours, he finally found it – 46. TerrorTours was shop number forty-six. And it seemed, once he’d found one, he instantly found others, all in the exact same place. Twillfit and Tatting’s was shop number 44, while across the alley, Potage’s Cauldron Shop was number 41.

Looking further down the alley, Harry found Wiseacre’s Wizarding Equipment at number 45. With a smile, he began walking. As the numbers steadily grew, he found himself being constantly amazed at the wide variety of shops in Diagon Alley.

On his first visit the previous year with Hagrid, he hadn’t had much chance to explore. Hagrid had been much too keen to only enter those shops that had what he needed on his book list.

As he passed wizarding camping stores, a junk shop, a second animal menagerie and all of the others, he vowed to explore them all over the remaining weeks of his holiday. Every now and again, a smaller alley, some bright and cheerful looking, others dark giving off a feeling of deep foreboding, split off. It was as he approached one such intersection, that he finally saw what he was looking for.

Shop 93 was set in the fork where Diagon Alley gently curved around and split from a second alley that led towards a group of houses. It was big, three stories tall. The windows were all dirt encrusted and the stone walls looked to be in dire need of a good scrubbing.

Harry’s steps slowed as he took in the sight. His first impression was pure excitement. This was something that he owned. His second impression was less favourable. If this was what the outside looked like, he shuddered at what the inside must be like. Obviously, this place hadn’t seen any human occupation for many, many years.

With some trepidation, he continued on until he could get a decent look at the shop beside it. Number ninety-five brought out a sigh of relief. While still maintaining that air of unkemptness, there were just a few hints that it had seen at least some care over the last few years. The windows, while still grimy-looking, were clean enough to be able to look into, for one.

Stepping up, Harry dropped his bags, cupped his hands around his eyes and peered inside.
The shop was barren, giving no clues as to what it once might have been. A long, wooden counter to one side was its only piece of furniture. Half a dozen shelves were set on the back wall. The wooden floor was covered in a dust so thick that Harry couldn’t even tell what colour it once had been.

With a frown, he stepped back and looked around. It was then that he noticed a small passageway between this and the building next door. Sticking his head around the corner, he was met with the odd sight of a gate set back a couple of feet from the street. Retrieving his bags and broom, Harry decided to explore.

The gate gave a mournful squeak as he opened and closed it behind him. The temperature dropped and he shivered as he walked down the shadowed side of the building. The sight that greeted him as he left those shadows froze him in place.

The back yard, while small, was in impeccable condition. The patch of grass looked to have been recently mowed. The flower beds were well weeded. Even the small vegetable patch looked healthy and vibrant.

“Hey! Get out of our garden!”

Harry started, startled at the loud voice being yelled at him. Whirling around, he came face to face with a boy maybe two or three years younger than himself. He had shaggy brown hair, deep blue eyes and a mouth that was scowling indignantly at him. His deep green robes looked old and threadbare.

Before Harry had a chance to respond, a tall thin lady with long brown hair flowing over one shoulder appeared in the doorway behind the boy.
Chapter 5

“Who are you and what are you doing in our garden?”

Harry stared at the tall, brown haired woman. She had a thin face and deep blue eyes that told everyone that the boy before her was her son. Both of her hands rested on the boy’s shoulders as she stood too close for him to get a good look at her dusty purple robes to see if they were as threadbare as her son’s.

“Er, I’m Harry, Harry Potter,” he began before sighing.

He knew that he should have expected it – he was in the wizarding world, after all. But even so, the woman’s sharp intake of breath combined with the boy’s blue eyes instantly going rounder than saucers confirmed that they knew who he was. Sometimes, in fact most times, he just hated all of that Boy-Who-Lived nonsense.

“Potter?” the woman breathed, her eyes screwed shut as though she was in pain. Harry saw her shoulders slump as she opened her eyes to look at him. “You better come up, then.”

Without waiting for an answer, the woman turned and, steering her son ahead of her, re-entered the building. Not really sure what to make of the woman, Harry followed along warily.

Just inside the back door, he found a staircase to his right leading up. Hefting his bags awkwardly, he followed the mother and son up. At the first level, he paused long enough to peek through the door to see a small room. An open door at its far end gave a glimpse of the second floor of the shop. In contrast to its lower level, this area looked to be filled to overflowing with stacks of shelves and tables and chairs piled high to overflowing.

Tearing his gaze away, Harry once more resumed his trek up the staircase.

He came out in the back of a small apartment. The large room was spacious and, like the garden below, was well-kempt. The kitchen off to his left was spotless, apart from the bowl and hand beaters on one end of the bench. An open recipe book rested on a stand off to the side. To his right stood an old rickety-looking table with four mismatched chairs clustered around it. Directly in front of him, in the middle of the sparse lounge, the woman and boy awaited him.

“You can leave your things there if you want,” the woman instructed, “while we talk in here.”

Stepping to the side, Harry placed his two bags against the wall and laid his broom on top before slowly crossing the room towards the faded red lounge chairs.

The sofa and two armchairs were grouped around a large fire place. On the mantle, three photos stood proudly, but Harry was careful not to pay them any attention – he didn’t want to seem rude in these people’s home. Rounding off the living area was a small window nook that overlooked the street. Bench seating filled with an assortment of pillows and a couple of thick-backed books indicated that this was a favourite area to relax in. Indeed, Harry’s first thought was that it was just the type of place that Hermione would love. He could see her curled up in such a spot reading for hours at a time.

“You would like to take a seat, Mister Potter?” the woman asked, indicating one of the armchairs.

After the three of them were seated, Harry saw the woman sigh once more before suddenly bringing her head up to look him squarely in the eye.
“I know why you’re here, Mister Potter,” she began. “To be truthful, I expected either you or maybe the goblins here years ago.”

Harry shook his head, confused. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what you’re talking about. Who are you?”

“Beth,” she paused to clear her throat before continuing. “Elizabeth Pemberton. And this is my son, Mickey.”

Harry nodded in greeting, his mind focused on the word ‘Pemberton’. He knew that he’d come across it before, but for the life of him, he couldn’t remember where.

“I assume that you’re here to evict us,” Beth stated flatly.

“Evict you? Why would I do that?” Harry asked, his voice rising in his startlement.

Beth stared hard at him for nearly a minute before answering. “You own this building and we’re here illegally.”

“What? Ma, he can’t really turf us out of our home, can he?” Mickey panicked.

“I won’t do that!” Harry stated emphatically in opposition to Beth’s nod.

Beth cocked her head at him. “If you’re not here to evict us, Mister Potter, then may I ask why you are here?”

“I only found out that I own this building today. All I was looking for was some place to live until I go back to Hogwarts,” he replied, firmly pushing the thought of the hearing to the back of his mind.

“Do you know if anyone lives in the other apartment?”

“No, it’s empty,” Beth frowned, “but if you think that I’m going to let a boy live on his own then you’re sadly mistaken. You can stay here with us.”

Harry narrowed his eyes at this strange woman that he’d just met. This conversation was travelling far too quickly for him to keep up with and he was certain that there was an awful lot that she wasn’t telling him.

“Thank you but I don’t want to be a bother,” he finally said slowly.

The corners of Beth’s mouth turned upwards. “You wouldn’t be a bother, Mister Potter. You own the building. You have every right to stay here. We might not have much, but as a mother, I couldn’t live with myself if I let you go off to live by yourself.”

“Allright,” Harry relented, a wave of tiredness suddenly engulfing him. “I’ll stay here for now but I reserve the right to change my mind. Just one thing? Could we lose the ‘Mister Potter’ thing? I’m Harry, just Harry.”

“Mickey, how about you go and show Harry the third bedroom while I finish up in the kitchen,” Beth instructed.

“Come on, then,” Mickey scowled.

As Harry went to collect his bags and broom, he debated with himself whether or not he was doing the right thing. When he left Privet Drive and even as he said ‘goodbye’ to Hermione that morning, it was with the full intention of spending the next four weeks by himself at one of the Potter properties. And while he’d found a building that he owned, he was still reluctant to trust anyone just yet. He’d
been let down far too many times.

But Beth had actually seemed to care. For no reason at all. Or at least, no reason that he could fathom. Maybe it was just that he was too tired to care right now.

The sight of the old mattress on the floor of the mostly bare room caused his eyes to droop. Apart from that catnap on the Granger’s swing, he’d been awake for over twenty-four hours now. As he eased his belongings onto the floor, he resolved to make a proper decision after he’d slept.

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By the time that Harry arrived back in the kitchen, Beth was hard at work mixing some kind of batter in a bowl. Harry watched, intrigued. Cooking was something that he’d been doing for years, ever since he could reach the stove at the Dursleys’. Often he’d make a cake or a pudding for dessert, not that he ever got to eat any of it.

His eyes roved over the bench and then down to the oven. Cupcakes, he finally realised. Beth was making cupcakes. And not just a single dozen or even two. She seemed intent on making dozens and dozens of them. Through the glass door of the oven, he could see four trays baking away. On the far end of the bench, another four or five dozen were cooling on racks.

Beside her, Mickey was also mixing something in a bowl. As Harry shifted to get a better look, his eyebrows disappeared under his hair. Mickey’s bowl was filled with a luscious pink concoction. Icing, he finally decided.

“You guys must really like cakes,” he stated.

Beth smiled at him as she continued beating. “We do, but none of these are for us. We’ll sell these ones to Jeremiah’s Tea and Cake Shop in the morning. Later on, I’ll make some extras to sell to some of the other shop-keepers that I know.”

“Everyone loves ma’s cooking,” Mickey boasted.

“I don’t doubt it,” Harry replied. “They smell delicious. Is that your job?”

Beth nodded. “We don’t make a lot, but it’s enough for our simple needs.”

Harry watched them deep in thought. They were like a well-oiled team. As soon as the last of the batter had been spooned into the tray, Beth shifted focus to help Mickey ice the cakes before they began preparing extra icing, this time including a wave of Beth’s wand to produce icing that continuously shifted colours from white to blues to purples and back to white again to be used in the piping that decorated the cakes.

“Why don’t you sell them in your own shop?” Harry blurted.

A sad half-smile flittered across Beth’s face.

“Once upon a time my husband and I had our own little tea and cake shop. Right downstairs, actually,” she replied. “But after he died, it wasn’t so easy to run a business, make the cakes and raise a little one by myself, so I had to close it down.”

“Why didn’t you just hire some help?” Harry asked.

“While our teashop did okay, there wasn’t enough money for that and there were also other … complications,” she stated.
As curious as Harry was, he clamped down on his initial impulse to ask what the complications were.

“If you like, I can help you make the cupcakes,” Harry offered, “I’m pretty good in a kitchen.”

“Well, Harry, if you wouldn’t mind helping clean up the bench a bit, we’ll be able to get to work on those extra cupcakes that much quicker.”

Picking up a cloth, Harry happily set to work.

-oOoOo-

Harry’s brain, like most others around the world, decided that the instant that he’d laid his head on the pillow was the perfect time to start spinning. Random facts and bits and pieces of conversation flittered here and there and inevitably, two pieces of obscure facts connected. That connection was so strong that it sent him tumbling out of bed, one hand scrambling for his glasses.

On bare feet, he padded across the room to start rummaging through his bags. With a grin of triumph, Harry retreated back to his mattress. The large black leathered tome of Magical Peers: The Ancient and Most Noble Houses of Britain fell open in his lap. Wiggling around, he positioned himself so that the moonlight falling through the window shone onto the book.

After flipping through the pages, his eye fell onto the title of these few pages: The Ancient and Most Noble House of Pemberton.

He was right. He knew that he’d heard that name before. It was the entry in the book just before Potter. Using one finger to guide him, he sped read through the double page entry. Facts, dates and names washed over him.

He learnt that Pemberton had been and still was considered one of the most well-known and respected magical names in Britain. It was also one of the oldest and reputed to be one of the richest. The Ancient and Most Noble House held manors and lands, business and buildings aplenty however, unlike the Potters, the Pemberton wealth had stayed strictly within the magical community.

Ephaniah Gimble, the author of the book, stated emphatically that there were few pure-blood families as pure as the Pembertons, not that Harry understood exactly what that meant, only that Gimble seemed to think that it was incredibly important and very much a good thing.

After reaching the end, Harry stopped to stare out of the window while he thought through what he’d just read. Deciding that he’d only found more questions than answers, he bowed his head to read it through again.

Even after putting the book aside some time later, Harry still didn’t understand why Beth and Mickey Pemberton, members of a powerful and rich Ancient and Noble family, had been living above an abandoned shop in near squalor for years.
Chapter 6

As early as he could after breakfast the following morning, Harry slipped out of number ninety-five Diagon Alley and strolled back towards Gringotts.

Arriving at the bank this early meant that most of the tellers were free due to the dearth of customers about. Picking one at random, Harry approached the high counter and settled himself in to wait until he was noticed. After nearly five minutes, the goblin finally put his quill down and lift his head to look him shrewdly in the eye.

“Yes?” the goblin asked.

“Good morning, I was wondering if I could make an appointment to see my account manager, please?” Harry asked.

“Your name?”

“Harry Potter, Sir,” he replied.

The goblin’s narrowed eyes and there was a slight pause before he called a second goblin over to him that had Harry feeling as though he’d done something wrong. He swallowed hard at the thought that he might have offended the goblin somehow. Professor Binns had told enough horror stories of how goblins dealt with wizards who’d offended them in the various goblin wars over the centuries to ensure that that was something that Harry desperately wanted to avoid.

“Wait over there until an appointment can be arranged for you,” the goblin stated, indicating a long stone bench that sat against the far wall.

“Thank you, Sir,” Harry smiled before crossing the hall to sit on the uncomfortable polished stone.

Surprisingly, it was only a matter of minutes before the younger goblin that had rushed off to set up his appointment returned.

“Come with me. Account Manager Slipshard is available to see you now,” the goblin instructed.

Jumping up, Harry made sure to follow at what he hoped was a respectful two paces behind his guide.

He was led through a narrow door into a hallway that felt more tunnel-like that anything else with its rough-cut stone walls. The dim lighting was just bright enough for Harry to realise that if he had been fully grown, then he would have had to duck his head to keep from hitting it on the low ceiling.

His guide stopped at the third wooden door that appeared and rapped hard on it with the pommel of a knife that had appeared in his hand.

“Come!” a deep voice commanded.

Opening the door, the goblin tipped his head and trotted back down the corridor. Tearing his gaze away from the back of the retreating goblin, Harry forced himself forward through the door.

He found himself entering a small cave-like room about the size of his old bedroom back on Privet Drive. The rough-hewn walls to either side of the room were filled with shelves carved into the very rock walls. Numerous crystals and small silver objects dominated the shelving, although Harry also
noted a number of shallow bowls and knives also in attendance.

Behind the rich mahogany desk, the rock wall was completely hidden by bookshelves filled with leather-bound books, folders and files. The desk though, was impressive. It took up nearly three-quarters of the width of the room and looked to be almost as wide as a bed. Its sides and front continued to the floor in the dark red wood, hiding everything behind it. Four or five small piles of folders were stacked neatly to either side of the large green blotter that dominated the centre of the table. A number of inkwells and quills were placed neatly at the top of the desk, ready for use.

But it was the goblin seated behind the desk that really caught Harry’s attention. Like all goblins, he was much shorter than Harry, with piercing black eyes that seemed to be looking not just at him, but into him as though measuring his very worth. Dark grey tuffs of hair sprouted out of his long ears and also, Harry noted, from his large nose. His long fingers were steepled together in front of him as he waited for Harry to approach.

“Close the door behind you, Mister Potter and take a seat,” the goblin instructed, indicating one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

“My name is Slipshard,” he continued once Harry was seated, “and I have been the Potter Account Manager for the last forty-three years.

“Nice to meet you, Mr Slipshard,” Harry said, rising slightly so that his outstretched hand could reach across the desk.

Slipshard cocked his head slightly and appeared bemused as he shook Harry’s proffered hand.

“May I assume correctly that you have some questions about your finances?” Slipshard asked.

Harry nodded as he withdrew his father’s letter and the folder that it came with from inside his cloak. “I found this yesterday in my Investment Vault and I was hoping that you could help me understand it all. I’ve never had any money that I’ve had to manage before, well, apart from my Education vault, but I only found out about that last year and I’ve only visited that once.”

Taking the folder, Slipshard gave it a brief look over before piercing Harry once more with his penetrating gaze.

“This all looks in order,” Slipshard stated, “it’s the standard Investment Portfolio that all Potter fathers set up for their children to help them learn about finances and investment. You have a single building set aside for your use, along with the funds in the vault itself. The rest of these documents detail the instructions to Gringotts in the extremely unlikely event that you need the main Potter Vault to cover complete financial disaster. Not that any Potter has ever needed that clause.”

Harry sighed and dropped his head. “Reckon that I’ll be the first then.”

A low growl accompanied by a thump on the desk snapped Harry’s head up.

“No. That will not happen,” Slipshard stated emphatically. “You are a Potter and I, your Account Manager, will not see a Potter fail.” Suddenly, his tone softened. “I will need you to tell me why it is that you think that you will fail in this task so that we can work to mitigate that outcome.”

“As I said, Mister Slipshard, I don’t know anything about finances. I’ve never had to look after money before and no-one’s ever taught me anything about money. I just know that whatever decisions I make will be the wrong ones.”

Slipshard leant back in his chair, his head cocked to one side as he studied him. The longer that the
gaze lasted, the more nervous Harry became. Finally, Slipshard leant forward once more. His hand shot out to wave over a particular part of his desk before he spoke in a language that Harry didn’t understand, before he once more waved his hand over that part of the desk.

“You know your limitations, Harry Potter, and that is good,” Slipshard stated. “What you and I need to do is to take those limitations and eliminate them.”

Harry nodded, unsure exactly what Slipshard had in mind, but liking the general notion.

“Can … can you teach me about money and how to invest like my dad wanted me to?” Harry asked.

Once more that strange tilt of the head was back. “Certainly, Mister Potter, that is indeed what I had in mind. I must say, that you are indeed one unique wizard.”

Harry’s eyes closed as he fought a sigh of frustration. It seemed that even among the goblins, that Boy-Who-Lived nonsense was prevalent.

“There’s nothing special about me,” he insisted, “I’m just Harry.”

“No, Mister Potter, you are indeed special, just like your father and his father before him,” Slipshard retorted. “You treat me not just as an equal, but as a better. That is very unusual in a wizard. And I have heard the same from the tellers that you have encountered. Most wizards treat goblins as little better than something that they stepped in. I thank you for that. It is most refreshing.”

A knock on the door interrupted Harry’s reply. He turned to see a goblin enter carrying a small stack of books, which, at Slipshard’s gesture, he placed in Harry’s hands before retreating from the room.

“Study these, Mister Potter, and between them and myself, your grasp of finances will improve by leaps and bounds,” Slipshard instructed.

Harry looked at the five books in his arms carefully before looking up at his account manager again. “Thank you so much.”

Slipshard nodded before continuing. “You will also be sent a statement of your financial position each month.”

Harry looked up sharply from the books once more. “Um, I’ve been having problems with getting mail of late. There’s been a house elf blocking my mail.”

Narrowed eyes and a low hiss marked Slipshard’s displeasure at that announcement. “That is something that we can deal with. There is a Goblin Postal Service that we will employ the services of before you leave Gringotts today. Now, what specific questions do you have for me about investing?”

Of the dozens that Harry had had running through his mind since he’d first read his father’s letter, he plucked the one that had dominated them all.

“What sorts of things should I invest in?”

Slipshard grinned in such a way as to make his eyes glint in anticipation.

-oOoOo-

Even though his head was still spinning from his talk with Slipshard, Harry knew that he had to continue with his appointed tasks for the day. And truthfully when he thought about it, he felt that
some time out in the muggle world conducting mindless shopping might be just what he needed. There’d be plenty of time to think about inheritances, magical cultures and tutors later. Much later.

And besides, with a fistful of notes in the new money pouch that Slipshard had given him just waiting to be spent, some things simply demanded to be considered as a higher priority right then.

As he passed through The Leaky Cauldron onto Charing Cross Road, he pulled up short, staring at the spot that he’d last seen Hermione. He shook his head at the thought that that was only yesterday. So much had happened between then and now that it seemed as though days or even weeks had passed by.

Resolutely, he squared his shoulders, picked a direction at random and started walking.

The muggle road was quite busy with a steady stream of cars continuously passing by, not to mention the dozens or perhaps hundreds of people purposely striding about. Thankfully, not one of them gave the small boy with old, daggy, oversized clothes a second look.

After a couple of block’s walk down the road, Harry finally spied what he was looking for: the entrance to a small mall. Impatiently, he bounced on the balls of his feet until there was a break in the cars and he could dash across the road. Then it was simply a matter of walking in through the sliding glass doors.

Inside, Harry found himself nearly overwhelmed by the shiny tiled walls, enticing display windows and all of the brightly lit signs. Everything around him was alien. This was not the sort of place that Aunt Petunia would ever take him. The oldest, darkest second-hand store had always been the type of shop that sold anything that he ever needed that he couldn’t simply get from Dudley after he’d either outgrown it or broken it.

Slowly placing one foot in front of the other, head constantly swinging around at every bright and shiny new sight, Harry moved forward. Rounding the first corner that he came to brought him face to face with the very thing that he was looking for: a men’s clothing store.

-oOoOo-

It was what felt like many days later that Harry finally escaped from the store and Gemma, the helpful sales assistant that had insisted that he try on clothes after clothes after clothes as though he was some kind of real-life dress up doll that had wandered in to her store specifically for her very pleasure.

As burdened down as he was by the dozen or so bags, Harry took his time walking back along Charing Cross Road towards The Leaky Cauldron. In no hurry, he idly gazed in the multitude of shop windows, marvelling at the many different displays. There were cakes and pies, travel brochures and world maps, backpacks and pop-up tents, magazines and books all designed to catch his attention.

It was one of the last that not only caught his attention and jerked him to a stop, but also forced him backwards to stare more intently in the shop window. A large, thick book lay open in the display window and one word, one name on the page, riveted his gaze to it: Hermione.

Quickly scanning the page, he discovered that it was part of a scene from a play by William Shakespeare called *The Winter's Tale*. Hermione, it seemed, was one of the characters in the play. Harry devoured her lines over and over, not once making head nor tales of what it was that she was trying to say. The old English phrases simply washed over him in incomprehensibility.
Deciding that the only way that he could understand it was to read the entire play, Harry made an instant decision. Pushing open the door with the large sign declaring *McHenry’s Used and Rare Books Going Out of Business Sale*, he entered the store.
A single look at all of his muggle shopping lying beside the two bags stuffed with everything else that he owned that he’d brought from Privet Drive decided Harry that a second shopping trip was needed, this time in the magical world, sooner rather than later.

So, on the second morning after waking up in the bedroom that Beth Pemberton had given him, he ventured forth to spend a whole stack of gold coins.

As Harry emerged from the passageway between Shop ninety-five and the building next door, he still hadn’t decided where to go first. Madam Malkin’s, Flourish and Blotts, Eeylops Owl Emporium and the Apothecary were all on his list of shops to visit, along with a half dozen or so others.

As he walked the length of Diagon Alley, he allowed his gaze to wander. Shops every which way beckoned, one or two even making the mental list in his head. It wasn’t until he’d nearly reached the end of the Alley beside the entryway to The Leaky Cauldron before he decided to start his shopping trip in a logical way, that he’d finally made up his mind.

Between the list in his hand and the one in his head, he knew that he simply had to start in Tannenbaum’s Luggage and Trunks, if for no other reason than the hope that he’d be able to find a magical bag of some kind to be able to carry all of his shopping. Making his way across to the storefront, Harry noticed two piles of trunks in decreasing sizes outside the doorway advertising the wares for sale. Ignoring these for now, he marched in through the doors.

Inside were stacks of trunks, heaps of boxes and hanging from the ceiling, bags in more sizes and styles than he thought was possible.

“Can I help you, young Sir?”

Harry spun around to find a kindly face pop up from behind the back counter. The man, roughly the same age as Beth, had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a deep blue apron protecting the rest of his clothes.

“I’m looking for a new trunk,” Harry explained.

“Of course, Sir,” the man smiled. “Is there any particular style that you’re after? A simple school trunk, perhaps? Or maybe a multi-compartment one? Then, of course, there’s our specialised trunks for travelling or that are designed for camping.”

The man looked like he could go on forever about his wares as he danced between the piles, pointing out and lovingly caressing each type at the same time.

“Um, could you tell me more about the multi-compartment ones?” Harry asked, cutting him off.

After nearly skipping to the far side of the shop, the storekeeper launched into his spiel on multi-compartment trunks.

“We have trunks with three, five, seven and nine compartments. These standard ones all come in different combinations of compartments. The compartments can be configured from small to large, anything from multiple jewellery slots to wardrobe, library and storage compartments, all the way up to compartments the size of a three bedroom house. It all depends on your needs. Of course, if we don’t have one in stock, we can easily make a custom designed one for you.”
“Um, I don’t think I need one with lots of compartments,” Harry mused, “it’s not like I’ve got a lot of stuff. And I definitely don’t need a whole house!”

Not knowing exactly what he was after, he decided to try the same thing that he did with Slipshard – let the expert do the talking and most of the decision making.

“What would you recommend?”

One elbow slipped into the man’s left hand even as a finger of his right hand began tapping on his chin as he contemplated Harry from head to toe.

“You go to Hogwarts, right?” Harry nodded. “Then you’ll obviously have books and clothes and school gear. Do you fly? Play quidditch at all?” Again Harry nodded. “Storage compartments are a must, then. And not one with lots of compartments?”

Here he turned to scrutinize the trunks scattered in piles around them.

“Let’s see. A three compartment trunk, with clothing, library and storage compartments … I’m sure we’ve got two or three like that …”

In short order, the salesman had pulled out two trunks, both the same size, one a deep ebony with silver clasps, the other an intricately carved brown wood with golden clasps.

“Let me show you their features,” he said as he knelt down in front of the black trunk. “Each trunk can be bound to up to three magical signatures for security purposes. Opening the trunk normally, gives you a normal-looking trunk.” This was demonstrated, allowing Harry to see the empty inside of the trunk. “It’s when we use these special insignias, that the multiple compartments become available. Let’s start with the wardrobe.”

Harry watched as a rune on the side of the trunk was pressed at the same time that the trunk was opened. The inside of the trunk was now filled with the top of a compartment with a silver handle and four additional runes lined up underneath it.

After the tap of each rune, the handle was pulled until a wardrobe appeared out of the trunk the height of Harry’s head. Two wardrobes were designed for hanging clothes and two others were kitted out with half a dozen hanging baskets perfect for storing socks and underwear in.

Once the last of the wardrobes were enclosed back into the trunk and the lid closed, a second outside rune was pressed. “Now for the library compartment.”

This time inside the trunk, were the tops of two bookshelves running lengthways down the inside of the trunk, each topped with a silver handle and four runes. Each bookshelf was pulled up for Harry to peruse. He estimated that each of the eight, four shelf high bookshelves could hold sixty to eighty books. Harry’s only thought was how jealous Hermione would be if she saw it.

“And lastly, the storage cupboards.”

Just like the wardrobes, once the lid had opened with the correct rune being pressed, the top of a cupboard appeared with its obligatory silver handle and four runes underneath it. Two of the cupboards, once they’d been pulled up, were shown to have twin doors on the front, that, when opened, showed a space well and truly deep enough to store a broom and all of his other quidditch gear. The other two cupboards also had doors that closed on half a dozen shelves.

“It’s extra features include a feather-light charm and a shrinking charm, both activated by pressing runes on the top,” the storekeeper explained.
“It looks perfect,” Harry exclaimed, wide-eyed at the trunk. “And that trunk is exactly the same?”

“Pretty much,” the man nodded, “except instead of runes, one of the birds in the carving act as the trigger – the owl for the library, peacock for the wardrobes, bowerbird for the cupboards, hummingbird for the feather-light charm and the swift for the shrinking charm.”

“How much?” Harry asked.

“For either of these two, fifty galleons.”

Harry nodded looking over the two trunks once more, before nodding, decision made.

“I’ll take that one,” he stated, pointing to the carved, brown one.

“Excellent,” the salesman beamed. “Before I go get the instruction booklet so that you can enable the security measures, is there anything else that you’ll be needing? A book bag, perhaps?”

As Harry turned to look to where he was pointing at the hanging bags, the salesman continued.

“They come with undectable extension charms, meaning that they can carry a lot more than they look like, as well as feather-light charms. Only ten galleons each. I’ll even throw in a wrist wand-holster for free.”

But Harry had hardly heard him. His eyes had zoomed in on two of the dozens of bags hanging there. One was a chocolate brown, the exact shade of Hermione’s eyes, the other, a soft orange, reminiscent of a sunset and co-incidentally, Hermione’s favourite colour.

“I’d like those two, please,” he said, pointing them out.

By the time that he left the shop, his pocket considerably lighter, Harry was extremely happy. He had a new trunk and a new book bag that should make moving around the castle loaded down with books a whole lot easier. And as an added bonus, he’d found Hermione’s birthday present more than a month early.

With that one major purchase already taken care of, Harry turned his attention to Madam Malkin’s. This stop, to buy new Hogwarts robes as well as half a dozen everyday robes, even with magic to help, somehow became his longest stop for the day. That, of course, only narrowly beat out the hour that he was wandering around Flourish and Blotts. Even though his school list had yet to arrive, Harry managed to find a half dozen books that he thought would be useful for school, including his own copy of *Hogwarts: A History*.

From there, it was across to the Apothecary to top up his potion ingredients and into Eeylops Owl Emporium for extra treats for Hedwig. Everything after that was purely for pleasure.

The junk shop was a riotous maze of odds and ends that, although he didn’t actually buy anything there, had him entranced by the vast array of magical items that existed. *Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop* was a must visit and he bought quite a few exploding dung bombs, vials of Ever-Changing Skin Colour Potions and an Insult Quill that he thought could be put to good use.

*TerrorTours* pulled him up short and caused him to stand staring at their display window for longer than he realised. The display included a massive world map with flashing dots for the magical communities around the world. At random times, a dot would expand to show scenes of a magical community that he never knew existed. While he watched, he saw Tibet, Transylvania, Wanaka in New Zealand, Salem in the United States and the Aboriginal community of Outback Australia.
This, he decided, would make a lot more sense to learn about than the ancient history of the giant and goblin wars of over a thousand years ago. This, in turn, led to the thought that as far as he knew, Hogwarts never taught anything about other magical communities or people, be they around the world, like the ones on the TerrorTours map or about goblins, house-elves, centaurs, vampires and merpeople. Mentally adding it to the list of things to talk to Sharpshard about, Harry moved on.

By the time that he’d investigated two other book stores, the magical camping store and a store full of magical musical instruments, his feet had declared that he’d done enough shopping for the day.

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“Is that all you bought? I thought that you had a huge list of things that you wanted to buy,” Beth stated from where she was curled up in the window nook with a book in her hands as he entered the flat.

Harry grinned at her as he held up his chocolate coloured book bag. “It’s bottomless and feather-light. There’s heaps of stuff in here – clothes, books, owl treats, even a trunk!”

“You got some books?” an excited Mickey asked, his head popping up from the lounge chair. “How many? Can I read them?”

“I got about a dozen, I think,” Harry replied. “You can read them if you want, but I mainly got them to help with my schoolwork.”

“Doesn’t matter, I’ll read ‘em anyway,” Mickey declared.

Beth laughed at her son as she reached across to tussle his hair. “Make sure you give them all back to Harry when you’re done with them, okay?” Then, looking up at Harry, she explained her son’s reaction. “He loves reading, but we don’t get to buy new ones that often. A bit too expensive for us. Every now and again we’ll venture into the muggle world and buy a couple from a second-hand book store, but never as often or as many as Mickey’d like.”

Harry nodded. “Sounds like my best friend, Hermione. She can never have enough books either.” Then, “I’ll just go put this stuff away and then I’ll help with dinner, if you like.”

“Thanks, Harry, I’d like that,” Beth smiled.

On the short walk to his room, Harry found his mind focussing on a combination of Beth’s statement and something that he’d seen the day before. There was something there …

His thoughts, though, were torn away at the sight of the goblin-made cube sitting on his bed. The owl insignia on top of the Goblin Postal Service cube was pulsing a soft white light. That could mean only one thing – he had a letter.

Dropping his bag on the floor, he raced across the room to open the box. It was just as Slipshard had promised. All mail to him would be redirected to Gringotts. It would then be placed in a matching cube and sent in the same manner as a portkey to his cube. For a small fee, he could even send his own letters out the same way. This way he could be assured that, not only would he receive his mail, but that Hedwig would also be safe.

Tearing open the letter, he recognised the writing immediately. Remus.

Flopping onto the bed, he began to read.

Dear Harry,
I hope that you are well and enjoying your summer holidays. It’s been a while since I heard from you …
Chapter 8

Harry stepped off of the staircase onto the second floor of shop number ninety-five, directly below the Pemberton’s apartment. The small room could be an office or a storeroom or even an extra part of the shop, but right now, it was a blank canvas, waiting to be called once more into use.

Outside its door, the stacks of tables, chairs and bookcases made moving around problematic. Despite this, Harry pushed onwards, determined to see the store in its entirety. Finally, after crawling under the final table, he reached a kind of alleyway between the furniture stacks and the edge of the mezzanine level. From here he could look down on the empty first floor.

Apart from the coatings of dust and the counter off to one side, it was vacant. A metal circular staircase on the opposite side to the counter caught his attention and he slowly made his way over. The tables, chairs and bookcases that he passed, while old and filled with dust, were clearly still in good condition. The carpet, too, while threadbare in some spots, looked to only need a good cleaning.

Stepping off of the step into the main part of the store, Harry noticed a small door behind him. Poking his head in, he found a small bare room. A sink in one corner indicated that it could have been a staffroom. The light in the entire floor was dim, but he supposed that that could be easily overcome by the simple process of cleaning the large glass windows to either side of the front door.

With nothing else to see on this level, Harry continued down the spiral steps to the basement level. A quick *lumos* was needed to see the large area, only slightly smaller than the one just above it. This room, too, was completely empty of furniture and, surprisingly, didn’t hold the faintest trace of dampness or mildew that Harry had expected for a cool dark room below ground to hold.

Retracing his steps, he returned to the main floor and hoisted himself up onto the counter to sit and think.

This store was much like its neighbour, number ninety-three, although perhaps slightly smaller. The main difference was in the fact that the furniture from both had obviously been brought in here and stacked on the upper level. With a bit of cleaning, both could be ready to go back into business very quickly.

But when it came down to it, this one, number ninety-three, held two distinct advantages that he could see. Especially for the venture that his brain had conjured during the night when he was supposed to be sleeping.

Before that could happen, though, there were two important conversations that had to take place.

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“Mister Potter. What can I do for you today?”

“Mister Slipshard. It’s good to see you again,” Harry replied, giving a tight lipped smile as he bowed slightly, his eyes carefully lowered to the ground.

“Excellent, Mister Potter!” Slipshard exclaimed.

Harry looked up to see the goblin behind the desk giving a wide smile, his pointed teeth prominent.

“The correct amount of respect and honour. You’ve learnt well.”
“Thank you, Mister Slipshard,” Harry beamed, barely restraining himself from showing his teeth as he smiled.

Taking a seat in front of the desk, Harry placed his copy of *The Daily Prophet* on his lap for later.

“I have questions about both my Education Vault and my Investment Vault that I’m hoping that you’ll be able to help me with,” Harry explained.

Slipshard steepled his long fingers in front of him. “It is my duty to assist you with your financial enquiries, Mister Potter. Where would you like to begin?”

“With my Education Vault, I think. It’ll probably be the quicker of the two,” Harry replied.

A wave of one hand indicated that he should proceed.

“I was wondering about the rules about where I can use the funds from my Education Vault. Does it have to be at Hogwarts?” Harry asked.

“You already know the answer to that question, Mister Potter,” Slipshard replied. “Every purchase you make here in Diagon Alley or indeed at any location, from books, to clothes to potion ingredients and more is paid for by funds from your Education Vault. In fact, anything that relates to your learning is covered by the fund.”


“Tutors would most assuredly be covered by that vault, Mister Potter. Is there a particular subject that you feel you need additional tutelage in?”

“There’s probably a couple of subjects at Hogwarts,” Harry replied wryly, before shaking his head, “but I was more thinking about a subject or two that isn’t taught at Hogwarts.”

Slipshard’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “What subjects would those be?”

“Business, definitely. But more specifically, after what little you told me about goblins and house-elves and then after something I saw in Diagon Alley, I’d like to learn more about the different magical cultures and communities in the world,” Harry explained.

“Financial tutelage is something that you don’t have to worry about,” Slipshard waved away. “I will be honoured to give you advice and additional books to aid you in your understanding over the coming years until you’re ready to administer the Potter Accounts by yourself when you come of age.

“As to this other idea, can I ask what it was that you saw in Diagon Alley?”

“There was this world map in *TerrorTours* that showed where all of the magical communities around the world were,” Harry explained. “I grew up in a muggle home and I didn’t even know that magic existed until I got my letter from Hogwarts when I turned eleven. And now I’m finding out about house-elves and goblins and there’s supposed to be mermen in the Black Lake. I guess seeing how much about the world of magic I didn’t know just got me curious.”

“An admirable notion, Mister Potter,” Slipshard praised. “And one that you should pursue. Feel free to hire tutors for yourself and have their services charged to your vault not just in this subject, but in all those that you feel the need for extra tutelage in.”

Harry nodded. “How would I go about finding tutors?”
“An advertisement in the *Daily Prophet* requesting applicants and their credentials should be more than sufficient,” Slipshard replied.

“Thank you,” Harry smiled, careful to keep his teeth hidden. “That answers those questions.”

Slipshard nodded. “You also indicated that you had questions about your Investment Vault?”

“Yes,” Harry replied. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about what you said made good investments. A product that is in demand that hasn’t already got an outlet or a product that people may not know that they need.”

“May I take it that you have a product in mind that falls into one of those two categories?” Slipshard asked.

“Actually, I think I’ve found a product that falls into both of those categories,” Harry smiled.

Slipshard leant forward over his desk. “You intrigue me, Mister Potter. I wasn’t aware that that could be the case.”

“Actually, I got the idea out in the muggle world,” Harry explained.

“You wish to bring a muggle-type business into the magical world? Ambitious, Mister Potter, ambitious. I can’t wait to hear the details.”

-oOoOo-

“An interesting concept,” the elderly man beside Harry mused. “Essentially two businesses in one.”

Harry shrugged, “something like that.”

Nervously, he peered at the old man beside him. He was only slightly taller than Harry was, with a prominent nose, a smattering of grey hair under his black bowler hat and had a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles perched on the end of his nose. The grey suit that he wore was old, but serviceable. For all intents and purposes, he was simply an old man out for a walk in the city with his grandson.

Appearances, of course, could be deceiving, especially when you were dealing with magical folk.

Slipshard assured Harry that the glamour charm that he’d applied was completely undetectable to muggles and more than strong enough to last the short time that they would be out and about on Charing Cross Road.

“From memory, either of the shops that you own would be quite suitable for such a business,” Slipshard commented.

Harry simply nodded his agreement, having already come to that opinion before he first stepped foot into Gringotts earlier that morning.

“May I assume that you have thoughts on how to acquire stock already in mind?”

“Two ideas, actually,” Harry replied. “From there … and from here.”

Slipshard peered along the direction that Harry indicated before turning his attention to the notice that Harry was showing him in *The Daily Prophet*. A deep chuckle preceded a near belly laugh that caused a number of people around them to look strangely at the pair.

“This, Mister Potter, is going to be a business to behold!” Shipshard exclaimed when he could talk
Harry winced at Beth’s startled cry. Beside him, Slipshard, once more sporting his proper goblin features, grimaced, his hands clutching each other in his lap, rather than over his ears which was where Harry suspected that they wanted to be. A heavy thundering erupted from the short hallway to the bedrooms and Harry spun around in time to see a mop-wielding nine year old emerge, a determined expression etched onto his face.

“Michael Octavius Pemberton!” Beth snapped. “Put that mop down this instant!”

The poor boy skidded to a stop, his head whipping between the three sitting on the lounge chairs. Slowly, the mop drooped so that its head was resting on the ground.

“Sorry, Ma, I thought you were in trouble,” he mumbled.

Beth opened her arms and the boy rushed in to cuddle against him mother, the words she was whispering to him too low for Harry to hear.

“Sorry Harry. Sorry Mister Slipshard,” Mickey mumbled when he was turned around.

“You were willing to fight to protect your mother,” Slipshard stated. “An admirable quality that can be tempered with age, experience and wisdom, young one.”

Beth pulled her son onto the chair beside her before turning once more to the boy and goblin in front of her.

“I’m sorry, I’m sure that I misheard you. What was it that you were saying?” Beth asked.

“I want to open a second-hand book store filled with both muggle and magical books and I’d like you to run it.” Harry stated once again, wincing with the expected explosion that he was sure was to come.

“That’s what I thought you said,” Beth grimaced before shaking her head. “I’m sorry, but I’m a baker, not a bookshop sales-witch.”

Harry grinned back at her. “But that’s good, brilliant even. Out in the muggle world, there’s this shop that’s half a coffee shop and half a bookstore. That’s what I want for the shop downstairs. There’s nothing like it in the magical world and I thought that you’d be perfect for it.”

“Believe it or not, Harry, I understand perfectly what you’re describing – I’m a muggle-born myself – and I think that your idea has potential. Not that I can’t see a whole mess of problems with the idea, but still there’s potential,” Beth stated, “but that doesn’t mean that I think that you’ve got the right person in mind to run it.”

“If I may,” Slipshard interrupted, “young Mister Potter has explained his thinking and reasoning to me. You, Ms Pemberton, have stated that you see pitfalls in the endeavour. Perhaps if we go over them together, we can make Mister Potter’s idea a reality.”

At Beth’s nod, he continued.

“Let’s begin with the bookstore component. Mister Potter rightly pointed out that in Diagon Alley,
there are three bookstores. All sell brand new books; indeed, two of those establishments are printers and devoted to selling their own wares. There are no second-hand bookstores anywhere in the magical world for people low on funds to purchase the books that they either need or want, be it for pleasure, work or even schooling.”

“He’s got that part right,” Beth murmured.

“Nor is there anywhere to buy muggle books in the magical world for the muggle-borns or those interested in such things. What he has described is indeed a hole in magical businesses that he proposes to fill,” Slipshard continued.

“What about stock?” Beth asked. “Getting a hold of magical books to sell second-hand isn’t going to be easy.”

“Mister Potter has come up with a way around that as well,” Slipshard smiled his toothy grin. “Deceased estates. We buy the libraries of deceased estates to use as stock. Indeed, after this meeting, I will be meeting with some clients that advertised such an estate in this morning’s Daily Prophet.”

Beth nodded. “Not a bad idea, Harry. And of course, getting muggle books would be child’s play. It’s a good idea. Not that I’m saying you’re asking the right person to run it, just that it’s a good idea.”

“You told me that you and your husband used to run a teashop downstairs,” Harry said tentatively. “And I know that you still bake enough cakes and things to sell either individually or to other teashops. Wouldn’t you like to have your own shop again?”

“I’d love to, Harry,” Beth replied, looking at the threadbare rug at her feet. “But there were other complications. Complications which stopped me from running that business.”

“Perhaps if you elaborated, we could work through them.” Slipshard stated.

After a deep breath and a long look at Mickey beside her, Beth spoke softly to the goblin. “Dylan, Mickey’s father, came from an ancient, proud family. His father, Octavius Pemberton, wasn’t happy with Dylan when he married me, a muggle-born, but he tolerated us. When Dylan died, Octavius not only disowned me, but actively worked to discredit both me and the shop. I couldn’t get anyone to work for me and the bills mounted up quickly, all with the highest interest charges possible. In the end, all that I could do was to shut the shop and try to disappear from his sight.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry said, looking between Beth and Slipshard. “Why would Beth be disowned?”

“It’s because I’m a muggle-born,” Beth replied. “And to many pure-blood families like the Pembertons, muggles and muggle-borns are worth less than the dirt you walk on.”

“But that’s … that’s disgusting!” Harry exploded, his nose wrinkling with disgust. “My family, the Potters, they’re not like that are they?”

“No, Mister Potter. The Potters have always happily ignored the circumstances of a person’s birth in favour of their words and deeds. The Potters have always been a most unusual Ancient and Most Noble family,” Slipshard stated.

Harry let out a deep breath that he hadn’t realised that he’d been holding. “Beth, you’ve just got to run the shop now! Everyone in the Alley loves your baking already. Plus you’re a good person and I want everyone to see that.”
Beth face softened at Harry’s intensity. “Harry, you’ve got a good idea for a business. I’d hate to see it fail simply because you had the wrong person running it.”

“Mister Slipshard, if we advertised the shop the right way, using the Potter name and,” here Harry gulped, “even that Boy-Who-Lived garbage, would that put a stop to these idiots who’d want the shop to fail because of Beth?”

“Most definitely,” Slipshard grinned his predatory smile once more.

“Good,” Harry nodded. “Come on, Beth, say you’ll do it. Please? We’ll hire you some help and they’ll definitely be muggle-borns like you.”

A small smile at the corners of her mouth alerted Harry to her answer moments before she made it official.

“Alright, Harry, I’ll do it.”

Mickey’s whoop of joy echoed around the flat as he started bouncing around, chanting something about all of the books that he’d get to read in the store.

“We still need to discuss your share of the profits, Mister Potter,” Slipshard announced.

Harry waved that away. “If I can have three favours, then you and Beth can work out the rest of the details together without me.”

A hand gesture from the goblin indicated that he should continue.

“Firstly, I’d like three books as part of my profits sent to me on the first of every month. It doesn’t matter what three books. They can be either magical or muggle. Beth’s choice. Secondly, I’d like a special sign mounted behind the counter that relates to the name of the shop. Actually, the name of the shop is the third favour. I’d like to be the one to name it.”

Beth laughed at the eager expression on the boy’s face. “They all sound more than fair, Harry. I take it you already have a name for the store in mind?”

Harry’s eager nod told them all that whatever the name was, he thought that it was perfect.
“Just throw the powder into the fire, step in and state your destination clearly, in this case, the Ministry of Magic, and you’ll be there in a jiffy,” old Tom, the innkeeper of The Leaky Cauldron explained.

Harry looked up at the lanky man, a look of dubiousness on his face.

“It’ll be fine, Mister Potter,” Tom laughed, “hundreds of people do it every day. Beats walking everywhere or taking the Knight Bus or even one of them muggle automobiles. Trust me. Bit of advice, though. Keep your elbows tucked in, you don’t want to go bangin’ into anything on your way past and I always find that it helps to step forward the instant that you start to feel yourself slowin’ down.”

“Um, right. Thanks,” Harry replied as he tentatively grabbed a handful of powder from the pot over the public FLOO in the bar.

Stepping forward, Harry threw the powder at the flames. Instantly, they shot up and turned a brilliant shade of green. Then, at Tom’s urging, he stepped into the fire. Surprisingly, or perhaps not, apart from a slight increase in temperature, he didn’t feel anything from the flames.

“Ministry of Magic!” he said, barely suppressing the cough threatening to burst from his chest as he inhaled a lungful of ash.

Instantly he was whirled away. Fleeting glimpses of strange rooms shot past in a dizzying rush before the world jarred back into focus, sending him tumbling onto a marble floor. Picking up his glasses from where they’d landed just in front of him, he pushed them back onto his nose and looked around.

He was in a vast hall with people bustling about everywhere. A whole bank of fireplaces was stretched out on the wall opposite him, mirroring the ones on his side of the hall that he now noticed. Further down the hall, it opened up to nearly twice the size of the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Standing in the centre of it all, was a fountain with a marble witch, wizard, goblin, house-elf and centaur shooting water out of different parts of the sculpture.

As he got to his feet, Harry absentmindedly dusted himself off. Sporadically, flames turned green, spitting out witches and wizards, who, without even sparing a glance in his direction, rushed off across the hall. For a fleeting instant, he wondered about the wisdom of coming here, but then he remembered what it was that he was escaping – the last of his homework, not to mention the team of goblins working on getting the bookshop / café ready for its grand opening in ten days’ time.

Resolvedly, Harry began walking down the hallway. A small booth not far in front of the fountain caught his attention and he wondered in that general direction.

“Name and business here in the Ministry of Magic,” a bored sounding security wizard asked from where he sat behind the booth.

“Harry Potter and I’m here to see someone in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Office,” he replied.

The guard’s demeanour instantly changed. He sat up straighter and looked intently at the boy in front of him. His eyes darted up to stare at Harry’s scar.
“Right, I just need to register your wand, Mister Potter,” the guard said to Harry’s scar.

Desperately trying to suppress a sigh of annoyance, Harry handed over his wand. The guard fumbled for it in his effort not to take his eyes off of that famous scar. After a brief wave of the guard’s own wand, Harry’s holly wand was handed back, along with a visitor’s badge.

“Just affix that to your robes, Mister Potter,” the guard instructed. “Department of Magical Law Enforcement’s up on Level 2.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, taking his badge.

Wide-eyed, Harry crossed the immense hall to find a bank of large elevators. Stepping into an open one, he peered up curiously at the half dozen paper airplanes circling its ceiling.

“Um, Level Two, please,” he stated uncertainly.

With a groaning rattle, the doors closed before the life jerked off. It stopped twice on its way up; the first time to disgorge four of the paper planes and the second time for three wizards to board, none of which noticed him standing in the corner, so deep were they in their conversation.

At Level Two, Harry squeezed his way past the wizards and out into a bare looking corridor. Tentatively, he eased his way around the closest corner where he found dozens of small cubicles. In front of them all was a wide desk with two harassed-looking witches behind it. Both appeared swamped in pieces of parchment that they were trying to collate into some semblance of order that Harry couldn’t fathom.

“Yes, can I help you?” the older, curly haired witch asked after looking up and noticing him hovering there.

“I … I was wanting to talk to someone about a crime,” Harry replied, not willing to ask the important questions until he was sure that he was in front of someone who could give him the answers he was looking for.

“What’s your name, love?” the witch asked kindly.

“Harry, Harry Potter.”

Instantly, the flick of the eyes was there. “Wait right there,” she commanded.

Before Harry could respond, the witch had bounced out of her chair and bustled away towards an important looking door halfway down the large room.

-oOoOo-

Madam Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was having another one of those days. Unfortunately, it seemed as though they were becoming more the norm than they once upon a time might have been.

Once again, she’d been rebuffed by Albus Dumbledore after making what she thought was a very firm but polite request for access to Harry Potter. But Mister Far Too Many Titles Dumbledore had the boy firmly ensconced away from not only the public, but also from the Ministry.

The boy wasn’t in trouble at all. There was no legal reason for her to see him and question him, thus why his Magical Guardian had been able to deny her access to the boy.
But that didn’t mean that Amelia didn’t want to talk to young Mister Potter. He’d had not only a front row seat to the events that happened at Hogwarts leading up to the death of Quirinus Quirrell, but he’d been instrumental in stopping the Professor from not only stealing a priceless artefact, but also in preventing numerous injuries to his fellow students.

Amelia had interviewed not only Professors Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall but also a dozen of the students who witnessed the event, including her own niece, Susan. She’d seen pensieve memories from numerous perspectives. Indeed, the entire file was more than ready to be signed off on and filed away.

But that didn’t stop her from wanting to have that one last interview.

A sharp rap at the door brought her head up.

“Come!” she called.

“Sorry to bother you, Boss, but I thought that you’d want to know that Harry Potter just walked into the office,” her secretary stated.

For an instant, Amelia was rendered speechless. And then her training kicked in.

“Send him right in,” she instructed.

While she waited, she absentmindedly polished her monocle. She’d bet a galleon that Dumbledore had no idea that the boy was here. This, she decided, was an opportunity not to be wasted.

Her first impression of the Boy-Who-Lived was that he wasn’t quite what she expected. He was almost scrawny looking and definitely smaller than even Susan. His messy black hair and round glasses were just as she’d imagined, although those piercing green eyes were absolutely stunning. She was sure that in a few years, they’d be breaking a few hearts. His clothes, though, were what surprised her the most. Susan had described a boy with old, baggy attire. This boy’s dark green shirt and light grey robes looked brand new and to have been tailored for him.

“Mister Potter,” she said, rising from her chair and extending her hand, “it’s very nice to meet you. I’m Madam Bones, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you too,” he replied, shaking her hand before his head cocked to one side.

“Bones? Are you related to Susan Bones at all?”

Amelia smiled. “She’s my niece.”

Harry seemed to relax slightly at the statement. “I sometimes study with Susan at Hogwarts.”

“So Susan has told me,” Amelia replied. “Won’t you take a seat?”

Once he was settled, she continued.

“I’m assuming that you’re here in response to my owl?”

“Um, no, ma’am,” he replied shaking his head. “I didn’t know that you’d sent me a letter. I’ve been having some problems getting my mail. A house-elf’s been taking it all before I get it.”

Amelia’s ears perked up. “A house-elf, you say? That’s highly irregular. Can you tell me anything about the house-elf?”

Harry shrugged. “Not really. He said his name was Dobby and that he was trying to stop me from
going back to Hogwarts.”

“Really? Do you know why?” she asked as she jotted some notes down.

“Something about there going to be some danger at the castle this year. I’m not sure that he was
supposed to tell me, actually – he kept trying to punish himself,” Harry stated.

“Hmm,” Amelia mused, “this elf didn’t happen to mention who his owners were by any chance, did he?”

Harry shook his head. “No, but I don’t think that they looked after him very well. He looked all dirty
and he was covered in bandages.”

“Without knowing the owner, I’m not sure that we can do much to stop the elf from stealing your
letters,” Amelia stated, looking down at the notes that she’d taken.

“That’s alright,” Harry waved away her apology. “I’ve got a Goblin Postal Service box now.”

“Excellent solution, Mister Potter,” Amelia replied, impressed with the boy’s solution.

“Um, why’d you send me a letter?” Harry asked.

“I was hoping to get a chance to talk to you about what happened at Hogwarts at the end of last term
with Professor Quirrell,” Amelia stated, carefully studying his face.

There was a slight wince before Harry looked down at his shoes.

“You’re not in any trouble, Mister Potter,” Amelia assured him.

“But it’s because of me that Professor Quirrell died,” he whispered.

“Be that as it may, it is not your fault,” Amelia stated firmly. “I’ve spoken to Professor McGonagall,
Professor Snape and many of your fellow students. I have a good understanding of what happened
that day and none of it is your fault. You are actually the last person that I wished to talk to about that
incident, primarily so that I could hear your version before I close the case.”

With a small nod, Harry looked up and for a brief moment, his green eyes met her grey ones.

“I was in the Great Hall when I heard a noise in the Entrance Hall,” Harry related. “I went out to
look and saw Professor Quirrell and Professor Snape fighting. Professor Snape said something about
Professor Quirrell stealing something and I tried to help by distracting Professor Quirrell, but it didn’t
work. Instead, Professor Snape got blasted into a wall.

“Then Professor Quirrell’s turban got knocked off and Voldemort’s face was in the back of
Quirrell’s head! He said that it was all my fault that he was stuck as some kind of spirit. He grabbed
me around the throat but it only burnt his hands.

“That was when Professor McGonagall tried to help, but Quirrell-Voldemort did something to knock
her out. I guess that he decided to escape then, ’cause he started walking towards the doors, but
Tracey and Daphne were coming the other way and he went to curse them. I managed to push them
out of the way and got hit instead.

“Then Hermione and Neville distracted him by yelling from the stairs and he tried to blast them and I
did the only thing that I could think of – I grabbed hold of him to stop him. His skin started burning
and it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt before. I held on until I passed out. Professor
Dumbledore said that Voldemort left Professor Quirrell and then Professor Quirrell died.”

Amelia looked up at the small boy from the copious notes that she’d been taking to take in his tear-streaked cheeks.

“Mister Potter … Harry … listen to me,” she commanded, forcing his eyes up to meet hers, “you did nothing wrong. In fact, it sounds to me as though you saved the lives of at least two people and you prevented You-Know-Who from getting a precious artefact.”

Slowly he nodded and she respectfully looked back down at her desk to give the boy time to wipe his eyes and to compose himself.

“Thank you, Mister Potter. I can happily close the case now,” she told him, then, as a thought struck her, she looked intently at the boy. “If you didn’t come here because of my letter to you, may I ask why you did come here today?”

“Oh, um, well, you see, I’ve been trying to find out about my parents and I found out that my dad had three best friends in school and when I tried to write to them, one of the letters was returned to me saying that the man was in Azkaban Prison and I was hoping to find out what he did to be put there,” Harry replied.

Only her many years as an auror prevented Amelia from gasping in shock and fleeing the room. Even without any names yet being said, she knew exactly what the boy was talking about. Why in the world the boy had never been told was beyond her. But right now, all that she could think of was that she desperately didn’t want to be the one to tell him.

“Can you tell me about Sirius Black?” Harry asked into the silence of the room.

Steeling herself with a fortifying breath, Amelia met those green eyes, so very like his mother’s, once again before telling all that she knew.

“Sirius Black is in Azkaban Prison because he became a Death Eater,” at Harry’s confused expression, she elaborated, “that means that he was a follower of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. But I’m afraid, Mister Potter, that it’s worse than that. Much worse. When your parents went into hiding, they used a special charm called the Fidelius Charm that causes a particular place to become completely secret, known only to one person and whoever that secret-keeper tells.

“Unfortunately, Sirius Black was your parent’s secret-keeper and he told You-Know-Who where to find you parents so that he could kill them. After that, Peter Pettigrew, another friend of your parents, confronted Black, but Black killed him, along with twelve muggles.”

Harry’s face was a mask of pure terror and rage.

“But … but, he was their friend! I’ve seen pictures of them together. They were friends! THEY WERE HIS FRIENDS! AND HE BETRAYED THEM?”

Roughly shaking his head, Harry shot to his feet, his wild eyes darting backwards and forwards. Suddenly, he spun, tore open the door and bolted.

By the time that Amelia had rounded her desk and reached the door, Harry was nowhere to be seen.

-oOoOo-

Two days later, Amelia found herself entertaining Harry Potter in her office once again. This time, there was no trace of the scared, unsure boy or even the rage-filled boy. Instead, he had a look of
pure determination that brooked no argument.

“I’m sorry for running out the other day, Madam Bones,” he began.

Amelia gave a short sharp nod. “It was perfectly understandable, Mister Potter. You were given a lot of distressing information all at once.”

This time it was Harry’s turn to nod.

“I’ve been thinking and I’d like to visit Azkaban Prison to see Sirius Black.”

Amelia leant back in her chair in surprise.

“May I ask why, Mister Potter?”

“That’s what I want to ask,” he replied with a wry smile that betrayed a hint of menace. “I want to ask Sirius Black why he betrayed my parents.”

Amelia’s mind was awhirl as she regarded the boy sitting in front of her.

She had to admit that if it was her, she’d want to ask the exact same question. But then, she’d been asking herself that question for ten long years. She’d known and worked with Black since they’d both graduated from the Auror Academy. His actions had always mystified her. If she’d been asked back then, Black would have been one of the last that she would have expected to betray anyone to Voldemort. And Harry had just handed her the perfect excuse to ask some hard questions herself.

“Alright, Mister Potter,” she said decisively, “I’ll take you to Azkaban and we’ll ask Mister Black some questions together. But I must warn you, Azkaban Island’s not a nice place. This won’t be an easy visit.”

“I don’t care,” he replied firmly. “Just so long as I can see that man and find out why.”

With a nod, Amelia made a notation in the diary in front of her. “I’ll set something up in the next few days and owl you when I have a day and time arranged.”
Chapter 10

The sun was still trying to peek over the hills behind them as Harry waited alongside the maroon-robed Madam Bones. Before them, the dark waters of the North Sea stretched away in choppy waves. Occasionally, white foam atop the waves made an appearance, breaking up the monotonous greyness.

“The ferry will be here soon,” Madam Bones commented, looking down at him through the monocle on the side of her face closest to him.

Harry nodded, barely suppressing a yawn.

In summers past, he’d always been a morning person, but that had more to do with avoiding punishment than anything else. He’d learnt a long time ago that having a cooked breakfast on the table waiting for the two behemoths of his uncle and cousin was the smart thing to do. Even at Hogwarts, he was often up early to ensure that he was ready for the day.

But in the last couple of weeks while he’d been staying with the Pembertons, he’d been gradually adjusting his body clock to allow him to sleep in longer and longer.

That luxury, though, had been blown out of the water the previous day when he’d received Madam Bones’ letter telling him that she’d finally arranged a meeting between them and Sirius Black at Azkaban Prison. And, since it was on an island and they needed to catch the ferry, she’d collected him from The Leaky Cauldron in what felt like the middle of the night.

As the ferry suddenly seemed to appear out of nowhere, Harry reflected that getting up early was probably a good thing. Tomorrow, Hermione and her parents were due back in England. The day after was to be the grand opening of his new store. Which meant that in less than two weeks, he’d hopefully be back sleeping in his four-poster up in Gryffindor Tower and sleep-ins would well and truly be a thing of the past. That was, of course, assuming that the outcome of the trial that he still had to look forward to didn’t leave him expelled. Or worse.

As the old, black ferry creaked up to the dock, he felt a warm hand on his back guiding him forward. Stepping out beside Madam Bones, Harry forcefully shoved all thoughts of Hermione and Hogwarts to the very back of his mind. There were far more important things to concentrate on today. Like finding out why his dad’s best friend betrayed his parents to Lord Voldemort so that he had to grow up as an orphan.

Harry strode forward, his face a mask of pure determination.

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Looking up at the dark grey fortress above him, Harry shivered. The whole island, even when they were still well off-shore in the ferry, felt incredibly dark and forbidding. A heaviness pressed down on his skull and he nearly staggered.

A hand on his elbow steadied him and he looked up at Madam Bones, intending to give a smile of thanks, but he was sure that what actually came out was more of a grimace than anything else.

Passing through the narrow stone entranceway felt confining and it was all Harry could do not to baulk at the dark shadows to either side of him. As he looked to his left, he could have sworn that he saw something in the shadows move. Whatever it was, be it man, beast or demon, was tall, far taller than the tallest man that Harry’d ever seen.
As they emerged through the portcullis into the open air, Madam Bones looked down to him once more. A sharp crack split the air and Harry shied away.

“Here, Harry, eat this,” Madam Bones half-smiled, holding out a piece of chocolate, “it’ll stave off the effects of the dementors and make you feel better.”

Giving her a quizzical look, Harry took the chocolate and popped it into his mouth. At once, the sweetness of the chocolate permeated his body and he shook himself, feeling much more like his normal self again. A tension in his shoulders told him that he’d been holding them hunched and he deliberately worked them loose, rolling first one and then the other.

“I just need to go and see the warden before we have our meeting,” Madam Bones informed him before veering off to the left.

Harry obediently followed along.

The grey sky above suddenly broke apart as intense beams of sunlight lanced down into the courtyard. The smile on his face froze, though, as he looked up. High above the prison, midnight black shapes floated about. Some were obviously encircling the island. Others seemed to be drifting aimlessly about. Others, though, remained stationary above the great stone fortress, concentrating on the towers that Madam Bones had pointed out as the High Security Wings of the prison.

Realising that he was in danger of being left behind, Harry hurriedly crossed the courtyard to re-join Madam Bones just before she passed through a heavy wooden door reinforced with black metal bands.

“Madam Bones, it’s a pleasure to see you again,” a grizzled-looking old man said from behind the desk in the office that they’d entered.

“Warden McNally,” Madam Bones nodded her greeting.

“Shall we get the security part over with first?” the Warden asked, his steel-blue eyes raking across to take in Harry as well.

At Madam Bones’ nod, two guards stepped forward. They both already had their wands out and, while they were currently trained on the floor, Harry could tell that they’d be ready to send a spell their way at half a thought’s notice.

“Your wands, please,” the guard on the right asked.

Both Harry and Madam Bones handed over their wands, only to have them scanned with the guard’s wands before they were passed across the desk to the Warden. In return, the two visitors were handed a small grey wooden disc.

“Hand that in when you’re ready to leave and we’ll give you back your wands,” the guard instructed.

Feeling kind of naked without his wand strapped securely in his wrist holster, Harry pocketed the disc.

“Warden McNally, how many Death Eaters do you have incarcerated here?” Madam Bones asked.

“I’ve received information that a certain dark wizard may not be quite as gone as we’d all like to think,” sharp intakes of breath met Madam Bone’s announcement. “I’d like you to move all of the remaining Death Eaters to the highest security cells that you have and see about adding some extra layers of security to them as well.”

“You expecting an attack on Azkaban?” Warden McNally asked.

Madam Bones shook her head. “No. And there’s no evidence that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is in any position to even consider it now or even in the future. But I’d rather we be overly cautious now rather than be bitten in the backside later.”

“Not to worry, Madam Bones, I’ll see to the arrangements as quickly as I can and have a report on your desk shortly after that,” Warden McNally promised.

With a nod, Madam Bones turned towards the door. “I assume that Black’s in the interview yard?”

“Ready and waiting whenever you are,” the security guard on the right replied. “If you’d care to follow us?”

As the four of them passed out the door back into the courtyard, Harry couldn’t resist a look up. Sure enough, the dark spectres were still flying about overhead.

“Madam Bones, what are those … things up there?” he asked hesitantly.

Harry saw her look up and grimace before shooting him a brief glance. “Dementors, Harry. They’re a part of Azkaban’s guard force. Unfortunately, they’re a necessary evil. They drain off and feed upon every happy thought a person has. And with no happy thoughts, it’s damn well near impossible to perform magic. Perfect for guarding a prison. With no happy thoughts and no magic, the prisoners give up even the idea of attempting to escape. Of course, if they get too close, they can administer their last weapon, a kiss that sucks out a person’s soul.”

Harry’s steps faltered, horrified and he stumbled as he looked up fearfully at the dark shapes criss-crossing the sky.

“There’ll be a couple of dementors on the wall of the interview yard,” Madam Bones warned. “But you’ll be in no danger. The guards will provide patronuses to keep us safe.” At Harry’s quizzical expression, she continued. “A patronus is a force of pure positive emotion. When a patronus is performed properly, the force takes the shape of an animal that represents its caster.”

“Expecto patronum.”

“Expecto patronum”

Two bright shiny streaks of light shot out of the wands of the two guards as they cross the threshold of the door in front of them.

Harry barely noticed the two guards now standing to either side of the door as his eyes focussed on the two gleaming silver animals, one a horse, the other an ox, as they circled the perimeter of the small yard. A flicker of movement on the ramparts above the yard brought his eyes up and he saw half a dozen dementors shying away from the bright animals below them.

“James?” a dry raspy voice called.

Confused, Harry dragged his eyes to the table and chairs that he now noticed sitting in the centre of the yard. Seated on one side, his hands and legs manacled to chains that lead to massive iron bolts set
in the rock floor to either side of him was a man, a prisoner.

Sirius Black, for it could only be him, looked decades older than Harry had imagined, based on the photos that he had of him. His black hair, which he’d always seemed to wear long, hung down to the middle of his back in a greasy, dirty, tangled mess. A dark matted beard dropped to near his chest. The dirty grey shirt and pants he wore looked to be four or five sizes too big for his frail, emancipated body.

“James? No, you can’t be James,” Black shook his head viciously. “James is dead.”

Taking the seat next to Madam Bones across from Sirius Black, Harry stared, revolted at his father’s once friend.

“Sirius Black. Do you know who I am?” Madam Bones asked sharply.

Black dragged his eyes away from Harry and narrowed before widening slightly.

“Amelia Bones,” he rasped.

She gave a short nod. “Yes. I’m now the Head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement. And this is Harry James Potter.”

“Harry,” Black whispered and Harry could have sworn that there were tears in his eyes.

“Harry, it’s so good to see you,” Black rasped in a voice obviously little used.

Harry’s eyes narrowed viciously.

“How can you say that?” he hissed. “How can it be good to see me? You betrayed my parents! You betrayed my parents to VOLDEMORT!”

Neither the drop of Black’s head nor Madam Bones’ hand on his shoulder could stop the rant that Harry had felt building for days.

“HE WAS YOUR FRIEND! I’VE SEEN THE PHOTOS. I’VE HEARD STORIES. YOU WERE FRIENDS AND YOU BETRAYED THEM! WHY? WHAT COULD MAKE YOU GIVE UP YOUR FRIENDS TO VOLDEMORT?”

By the end, spittle was flying across the table at the convict even as his green eyes blazed with his anger.

The silence stretched out in their frozen tableau – Black with his head lowered, Madam Bones with her hand on Harry’s shoulder, keeping him in place as he leant angrily across the table.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?” Harry spat.

“What do you want me to say?” Black asked quietly, his eyes rising to meet Harry’s. “Everything you’ve said is right! James and Lily were my friends and I as good as sold them out to Voldemort.”

“‘As good as sold them to Voldemort’?” Madam Bones asked quickly. “What do you mean by that?”

Black’s eyes flicked across to her before dropping once more.

“Just what I said. They were betrayed because of me,” Black replied harshly.
“Sirius Black, are you saying that you didn’t betray Lily and James Potter?” Madam Bones asked, her voice rising in obvious disbelief.

“What does it matter?” Black intoned dully.

“It matters to me!” Harry yelled. “They were my parents!”

Black’s eyes snapped up to the boy, his dull grey eyes meeting the sharp green ones for the first time since they’d sat down. “You don’t think I don’t know that? Not a day goes by when I don’t think about your parents! I remember every stupid adventurous thing that we got up to. I remember the day they were married. I remember the day they told me that Lily was pregnant with you. I remember the day James placed you in my arms for the first time. I remember babysitting you. I remember all of it. Every! Single! Day! Don’t think I don’t. Your parents meant the world to me. I would have died for James. Or Lily. Or you!”

“Black, I think that you’d better tell us everything. And I mean, everything!” Madam Bones commanded through her narrowed eyes and pursed lips.

Black’s eyes flitted between the two of them before dropping to the tabletop once more. He sat like that in silence for a long time before a great shuddering sigh rippled through his body. Lifting his great shaggy head, he began to tell his story in a dead monotone.

“You’ve a right to know. If anyone does, it’s you, Harry,” another jagged sigh escaped him. “I guess it goes back to Hogwarts. James, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew,” this name was distinctly spat, “and I ruled the school. And in our many adventures, we became animagus. Well, not Remus, obviously.”

A sharp intake of breath beside him caused Harry to look quickly at Madam Bones.

“You were all illegal animagi?” At Black’s nod, she spoke to Harry although her narrowed eyes never left Black. “Animagi are able to transform their bodies into the shape of an animal.” Whether she noticed Harry’s nod of understanding or not, that was all the explanation that he received before she snapped off a question to the man in front of her. “What were your forms?”

“James was a stag. I’m a great black dog and Pettigrew is a rat.”

“Why didn’t Remus Lupin have an animal form?” Harry asked, but his question was over-ridden by the Head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement.

“What does that have to do with Lily and James’ deaths?” Madam Bones asked.

“Everything!” Black stated. “Peter was always the weakest of us all. He was never a threat to anyone, preferring to hide behind our coat-tails. When James and Lily put their home under the fidelius charm, they wanted to use me as their secret-keeper, but I convinced them to double-bluff Voldemort and to use Peter instead!”

“Aren’t the Potter’s secret-keeper?” Madam Bones asked quickly.

“No! It was all an act to fool the Death Eaters!” Black replied, shaking his head like a dog worrying over a bone.

“If that’s true, why didn’t you tell everyone at your trial?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowed and his mind awhirl with confusion.”

A great barking laugh erupted from Black. “What trial? I’ve been here for nearly eleven years and I haven’t had a trial yet!”
“What?” Madam Bones asked, half out of her seat in obvious outrage. “You should have been given a trial within days of being brought in for killing Pettigrew!”

“What? Pettigrew’s dead?” a confused Harry asked, “and you killed him?”

“Wrong again, I’m afraid. I meant to kill him. I wanted to kill him. Still do, when it comes to it. But Peter’s still alive, I’m afraid. Faked his own death. When I confronted him, he yelled out that I was the one who betrayed James and Lily and then, before I could do anything, he used his wand that he’d hidden behind his back to blast the street before cutting off a finger and transforming into a rat and disappearing into the sewers,” Black replied, his black eyes dark as coal.

“I must say that’s quite a story you’ve got there, Black,” Madam Bones stated from where she leant back in her chair.

“Gotta admit that,” Black replied. “Every word’s true, though.”

“If it’s true that you never had a trial, then I might even go as far as being persuaded to believe some of it,” she allowed.

A sudden look a hope shone out of Black’s eyes.

“Might believe,” Madam Bones repeated. “I will go this far, Black. When I get back to the Ministry, I’ll look into whether or not you actually had a trial. If you didn’t, then I’ll see what I can do about arranging one. Be warned, though, I’ll want testimony under veritaserum, as well as pensieve memories. A witness or two that could back up anything that you’ve told me wouldn’t go astray, either.”

“Thank you, Madam Bones. Can’t ask for more than that,” Black stated.

“If you’re innocent, then you’ll be out of here. If you’re guilty, I’ll be pushing for the death penalty,” Madam Bones stated. “I’ve got no idea how long that’ll take. Might still be a couple of months before I can get the Wizengamot to grant you a trial. But it will happen.”

Black’s shaggy head nodded and for the first time, the hint of a smile crinkled the corners of his mouth. Switching his gaze, he looked at Harry once more.

“You know, Harry, your parents made me your godfather.”

Dazedly, Harry nodded. He didn’t really know what that meant, but if, and it was a big if at the moment, if it was true that Sirius Black was innocent, then having a godfather sounded as though it had the potential to be … good.

With a final nod, Madam Bones rose, Harry alongside her. As they crossed the yard once more, Harry found himself looking up. A flash of brown in the sky caught his attention and he saw an owl flying towards the prison. Another owl flashed into his memory and he gasped.

Spinning around, Harry sprinted back to the table that Black was still sitting at.

Panting slightly, his eyes wild, Harry leant over the table towards the clearly startled man.

“What animal did you say Pettigrew could change into?”
Chapter 11

“Hermione, dear, time to wake up.”

Blinking profusely, Hermione lifted her head to discover that they were finally home. After emerging from the car, she stretched luxuriously before trotting around to the boot to help with the unpacking. Grabbing up her two bags, Hermione followed her parents up the drive.

“Looks like your booklist is here,” her Dad announced, bending to pick up a thick envelope that lay on the tiled floor just inside the door.

Hermione grinned as she snatched the letter out of his hand before turning pleading eyes on to her mum.

“I think we can swing a trip to Diagon Alley the day after tomorrow,” her mum laughed.

“Thanks, Mum,” Hermione replied.

Then, hefting her bags once more, she made her way up the stairs and thence to her room. After kicking the door shut behind her, Hermione dropped her bags with a groan. Only here in the safety of her own room could she feel free to complain about the weight of her bags. For as long as she could remember, her parents had always had the same holiday deal: she could buy any books she liked, providing that she was the one to carry them, without complaining.

A flash of white outside her window prevented her fall onto her bed.

“What?!” she exclaimed, rushing to open her window.

Regally, the snowy owl hopped in onto her desk before holding out her leg. Hermione wasted no time untying the letter before grabbing a few owl treats from the bottom drawer of her desk. Then she raced across to the nearby bathroom to fill a glass of water for the owl. With Hedwig taken care of, she plonked herself onto her bed and ripped open Harry’s letter.

Dear Hermione,

Hi! How are you? How was your holiday? I’m pretty sure that you were supposed to get home today, so I thought that I’d send along a letter.

Firstly, I know that you’re probably thinking that I’m writing this at Longbottom Manor. However, those plans that we discussed didn’t quite work out. I’ve been staying in Diagon Alley at an apartment that I own.

Just wait until you hear all of the things that I’ve learnt from the goblins at Gringotts. And between them and a bunch of other stuff that happened, I’ve got so much to tell you. I won’t write it here. I don’t think that Hedwig’d be able to carry a letter that big.

Have you got your booklist yet? Mine came the other day. I don’t know who that Gilderoy Lockheart guy is, but, after reading through some of those books, I reckon that he knows a lot about Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Here Hermione paused to open her Hogwarts letter. Flipping to the booklist, she noted that almost the entire booklist was comprised of books written by Gilderoy Lockheart. Putting that aside, she once again picked up Harry’s letter.
Let me know when you’re going to be in Diagon Alley so that we can meet up at The Leaky Cauldron and then we can spend the day together if you’d like. Don’t worry about me not getting any letters that you send, I’ve got that sorted.

Hope to hear from you soon,

Harry.

With both letters firmly in hand, Hermione promptly raced from the room in search of her parents and a definite time to tell Harry to meet them the day after tomorrow.

-oOoOo-

The instant that Hermione entered The Leaky Cauldron, she began searching the dark, crowded bar for her best friend. She’d barely taken two steps, though, before the messy haired, green-eyed boy materialised directly in front of her.

“Harry!” she exclaimed and, without even stopping to think, she pounced at him.

Harry stiffened in her arms and she immediately let go, her cheeks reddening in embarrassment.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

In return, she received a shy grin. “That’s okay, Hermione, I’m just not used to being hugged, that’s all. It’s brilliant to see you, though. How was your holiday?”

“It was wonderful, Harry,” she began, but before she could even begin to tell about all of the wonderful things that she saw, her parents made their presence known.

“Hello, Harry,” her dad said, extending a hand.

“Hello, Mister Granger, Mrs Granger. It’s nice to see you again,” Harry replied.

“Hello, Harry,” Mrs Granger said, then, “how about we get out of here, we seem to be attracting a lot of attention.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed as she followed Harry towards the back of the Inn and the entrance to Diagon Alley. In the two weeks since they’d left him here, Harry’d changed.

He now wore clothes that actually fit him. The dark cargo-style shorts, deep green shirt and grey robe looked good on him. And that combined with the way that he held himself told her that whatever he’d been doing had done him a world of good. He seemed more confident, more sure of himself than she’d ever seen him before and Hermione liked this new version of her best friend.

“Where to first?” Harry asked as the marvellous sight of Diagon Alley appeared.

“The bank, I think,” Mister Granger stated. “We’ll need to change our money into those big gold coins to use in the shops.”

With that, Harry took the lead. Speeding up, Hermione walked beside him, fervently resisting the strange impulse to hold his hand as they walked and talked a mile a minute about her holiday.

Upon entering the bank, Hermione fell half a step behind. She watched, wide-eyed as Harry led them up to a spare teller before he bowed to the goblin. Biting her lip in her confusion, Hermione followed suit, careful to keep half an eye on what was happening. A few seconds later, the goblin also bowed and Harry once more stood tall.
“Good day, Sir, my friends would like to exchange some muggle money into wizard money,” Harry stated, motioning for Mister Granger to come forward.

Before too long, a small sack of gold and silver was handed back across the counter and Harry led them in another bow before they exited Gringotts.

“Harry, when did you learn about goblin customs?” Hermione demanded.

He grinned at her. “My Account Manager, Slipshard, has been teaching me some things and he’s given me a couple of books as well.” Then, obviously interpreting her expression correctly, he finished his statement in the only way that Hermione would have accepted. “You can read them if you want once we get back to Hogwarts.”

This time Hermione gave in to her impulse and clutched at his arm as she beamed her widest smile at him. “Thanks, Harry.”

“So where do you want to go next?” Harry asked.

“Bookshop last,” Mrs Granger stated forcefully.

Hermione pouted before a thought crossed her mind.

“Second last, mum, I want to see where Harry’s been staying before we go home.”

Her eyebrows rose at the expression that crossed Harry’s face. The only way that she could think to describe it was as a smirk. Something that she’d never seen him do before.

“Harry?” she asked.

Obviously misunderstanding her, he pointed across the way. “The Apothecary’s closest. Shall we start there?”

For the next hour, the four of them criss-crossed the Alley in search of Hermione’s school supplies. In amongst the shopping, the two friends continued talking, although, much to Hermione’s frustration, Harry consistently steered away any questions about what he’d been doing, continually saying that it’d wait until later.

At long last, they turned their steps towards Flourish and Blotts. Around them, a crowd grew and it wasn’t until they were right outside the store that they realised why. Apparently, Flourish and Blotts was the site of a book signing with the actual author of most of their Hogwarts booklist.

“Harry? What’re you doing here?”

Hermione turned alongside her friend to find a horde of red-headed Weasleys coming up behind them.


Twin grins of mischief locked onto the fact that Hermione was still holding on to Harry’s arm. The instant that she realised it, Hermione let go and shuffled sideward.

“Now, Hermione, there’s no need to be like that,” one of the twins, Fred she thought, grinned.

“Not on our account,” the other, George, if she was right, continued.

“If you feel the need to hang on to Harry …”
“We won’t stop you.”

“But as your friends …”

“We feel it only right to warn you …”

“We may tease you mercilessly …”

“Whether or not you’re attached …”

“To our green-eyed wonder …”

“For the rest of the school year,” they finished together.

“Boys!” the dumpy woman behind them who could only be their mother warned.

Immediately, twin looks of remorse crossed Fred and George’s faces for the barest flicker of a second before their looks of mischief returned.

Thankfully, Harry tried to divert their attention, however unsuccessfully that endeavour was.

“Did you get a new pet, Ron?” he asked.

The lanky red-head scowled. “Yeah. Had to, didn’t I? Scabbers got confiscated by the DMLE yesterday. No idea why they’d want my rat of all things. Didn’t say, did they. But then, he was pretty useless. Gave me five galleons as ‘compensation’. So, I bought myself an owl.”

Hermione looked in through the bars of the small cage that Ron held up to see the cutest, tiniest owl that she’d ever seen before.

“Is that a scop owl?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Ron replied. “No good for long distance flights, but good enough to get from Hogwarts to home.”

“What are you going to call him?” Harry asked.

“Dunno, haven’t decided yet,” Ron shrugged.

“If you’re not going to enter the establishment, kindly move out of the way of the entrance,” a bored voice drawled.

Looking over the heads of the Weasleys Hermione spotted a tall man with a pointed chin and nose, long platinum blonde hair and a sneer on his face that screamed that everyone in front of him was his inferior. There was no doubt in her mind who this man was – Draco Malfoy’s father. The resemblance was too uncanny for him to be anyone else.

“Malfoy,” Mister Weasley intoned, drawing his brood to one side.

“Weasley,” the man sneered, then, “oh, look, muggles. How delightful.”

At her back, Hermione felt her father stiffen at the clear insult.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the book signing is about to begin,” a loud masculine voice announced from the doorway, interrupting the tense tableau.
Around them, a scrum of focussed, determined witches and their children fought their way in to Flourish and Blotts. Amongst them, Hermione recognised a number of obvious reporters and their photographers, obviously eager for a piece of the news-worthy story.

Malfoy senior strode forward, but if he was expecting the crowds to part at his approach, he was seriously mistaken. Between the too small doorway and the far too many people trying to enter it at the same time, the resulting crash was inevitable.

First a girl with long dirty blonde hair was knocked to the ground. When her father stopped to assist her, he was bumped from the side, causing him to sway into the path of two witches, both of whom were knocked off-balance. After that, it was a simple game of dominoes.

Hermione watched in dumb-struck fascination as nearly half the crowd quickly ended up on the ground, including the aristocratic Mister Malfoy. In fact, his pin-wheeling arms caused a number of their own group to end up on the ground. Harry, Ginny Weasley and both twins were sent sprawling, with most of the rest of the Weasleys being knocked back a few paces.

“Harry! Are you alright?” Hermione asked as she helped him back to his feet.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine,” he replied, rubbing the arm that he’d landed upon.

Together, the two of them then bent to help retrieve the various packages that had fallen to the ground and return them to their rightful owners.

“Here,” Mister Malfoy said, thrusting a small, leather bound book at Ginny, “you dropped this.”

Long red hair whipped back and forth as the small girl shook her head.

“That’s not mine,” she managed to whisper.

“It must be yours then,” Mister Malfoy insisted at the blonde haired girl who’d been the first to be knocked over.

“Oh, is it?” she replied in an airy sort of voice. “I didn’t know. Thank you, then.”

Hermione watched as she took the small book, leant over and stuck it into her sock before skipping off to re-join her father.

“I’ll wait for you out here,” Harry stated with a wary look at the bookstore. “I’ve already got my books.”

-0O0O0- 

“Where are we going, Harry?” Hermione asked as she, Harry and her parents casually walked down the centre of Diagon Alley.

“It’s just down here a bit further,” Harry replied vaguely causing Hermione to scowl slightly at his continued lack of forthrightness.

Deciding to ignore Harry’s lack of answers, Hermione began looking further and further down the alley in an attempt to discover the answer to her question for herself. Shops of all kinds lined either side of the alley, but obviously none of them could have been Harry’s home for the past two weeks. Occasionally a side alley would open and she’d glance down them, but when Harry didn’t change direction, she quickly lost interest in them.
And then she saw something that made her gasp in shock even as her feet faltered and she came to a halt in the middle of the road. Slack-jawed, she stared at the building before her. The closer of the two shops that made up the building was a derelict hulk that hadn’t even garnered a second look. No, it was its sister building that held all of her attention.

*Hermione’s Book Nook.*

She stared and stared at the large ornate sign written in her favourite shade of orange. And then the smaller words written on the sign registered:

*Tea shop and seller of second hand magical and muggle books.*

Dragging her gaze down, she looked at the windows to either side of the open doors. One side displayed a variety of intricately decorated cakes and muffins, while the other displayed books of all sizes and ages. And sitting directly in the centre of the books, was an open tome that she was intimately familiar with – Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale.*

Finally, she looked up from directly outside the window display where she’d unknowingly walked to see Harry standing beside her. He was grinning from ear to ear, but underneath it all, she could see a hint of fear in his eyes.

“Harry?” she breathed.

“Do you like it? We opened it yesterday. Actually, I, uh, I own it,” Harry stammered, his cheeks suddenly gone red.

“You named a bookshop after me?”

Harry nodded shyly. “Who else do I know who loves books so much?”

An unfamiliar squeal of joy erupted from Hermione seconds before she crashed into her best friend, wrapping him in the biggest, longest hug that she could.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she repeated over and over. “I love it.”

Then, quite unexpectedly, she let go, grabbed his hand and began dragging him towards the doors.

Inside, Hermione found herself in heaven.

All was bright and airy with a feeling of homeliness pervading everything. To the right, a long glass fronted counter displayed the various cakes and other delectable items for sale. A half dozen small tables, each with two chairs ranged around the area were half full of people eating, drinking and talking quietly.

And then there were the book shelves. Dozens of them covered the back walls and created aisles in the left half of the store. A polished bronze circular set of stairs led up to a mezzanine level where even more shelves of books sat waiting to be explored. To the side of the staircase, a small sign pointed out that the muggle books could be found on the basement level.

Hermione turned pleading eyes on to Harry.

Laughingly, he gestured around them, “have fun!”

-oOoOo-

Sometime later, Hermione re-emerged from the back of the store, her arms weighted down with a
stack of books that she could only just manage to see over.

As she put them on top of the counter, the top few started to cascade, only to be stopped by Harry’s hands appearing out of nowhere.

“Uh, Beth, could you take a couple of steps to the side?” Harry asked the woman behind the counter.

As she did so, a puzzled Hermione caught sight of a small bronze sign affixed to the back wall.

_Hermione’s Book Nook would like to offer a 25% discount to anyone who shares their name with our store._

Her eyes widened as she read the sign over a second time. And then a third. With a new squeal of joy echoing around the store, she pounced on Harry once more before quickly releasing him and rushing back into the book stacks.

“Oh, Harry,” Mister Granger moaned, “what have you done?”
Chapter 12

Albus Dumbledore paused one last time to run his hands over his brown tweed suit. His beard was glamoured to be half its usual length, as was his hair. His half-moon spectacles were perched precisely on the end of his crooked nose. He considered himself to be the quintessential muggle. With one last glance at his fob watch, he nodded and lifted a finger to press the doorbell.

The sounds of heavy footsteps accompanied by occasional grunts could be heard approaching before the door was wrenched open.

“Good morning …” he began before he was rudely interrupted.

Vernon Dursley’s face had instantly achieved its distinctive red hue the instant that he recognised the wizard standing at his door.

“YOU!” he bellowed before trying to slam the door shut.

“Come now, Mister Dursley, there’s no need to take that attitude,” Dumbledore sighed, a merry twinkle in his eye. “I’ve simply come to escort your nephew out for the morning.”

Vernon paused momentarily in his efforts to force the door shut against whatever was holding it open to stare at the … man at the door.

“HIM! Don’t you mention that freak in my presence!” he bellowed. “And get your ruddy foot or whatever it is away from my door!”

“Vernon?” a nasally voice called from further down the hallway.

“Ah, Petunia, so nice to see you again,” Dumbledore smiled.

Petunia Dursley’s long horsey face paled at being addressed by the man she remembered all too well.

“As I was telling your husband, I’ve come to escort your nephew out for the morning.”

“Well you’re out of luck, then,” Vernon hissed, “the boy hasn’t been here for a month and after the state that he left the house in, he’s never coming back!”

Dumbledore paled slightly at Vernon’s words. Surely the poor man was mistaken. The tracking charm that he’d placed on Harry’s trunk still indicated that Harry resided at number four Privet Drive.

For peace of mind, Dumbledore delved into the mind of Harry’s uncle.

In an instant, he’d battered through Vernon’s memories until he came to an image of the three Dursleys returning home after some day’s away. A bellow was heard from Vernon’s son causing the whale of a man to huff his way upstairs. The instant that he stepped inside the boy’s room, he saw Dudley standing slack-jawed pointing at the massive hole above the desk.

With a roar of rage, Vernon was back out the door and undoing each of the five locks on the room next door. Finally, the last lock was ripped off and the door yanked open. Inside, was a room that looked as though a tornado had hit it. Furniture had been pulled around, bits of wood and plaster littered the bed and floor. The narrow window was still open to the elements as much as it could be considering the bars on the outside of the room itself.
Pulling back out of the man’s mind, Dumbledore flicked his hand, raised his wand and gave two precise movements. Vernon and Petunia Dursley ceased their struggles and backed up, turned around and lumbered into the sitting room. With the two of them out of the way, Dumbledore followed his tracking charm to the tiny cupboard under the stairs. Another wand flick had the lock off. Opening the door, he bent forward to stick his head inside, directly over Harry’s trunk.

With a scowl for plans going astray and a mutter against hard-headed boys not doing what they should be doing, he strode to the sitting room. Surprisingly, he found not two but three Durselys in attendance.

*At last, something’s going right this visit,* he thought.

After using his wand to direct Dudley to a seat beside his parents, Dumbledore began pacing as he thought of the best way to proceed.

It was imperative that Harry return to Privet Drive.

When Voldemort returned, as Dumbledore knew that he would, Harry was needed in such a mindset as to willingly sacrifice himself in order to weaken Tom which would then give Dumbledore himself the opportunity to finally rectify his mistakes from decades past. Of course, as the vanquisher of Lord Voldemort, his influence over the wizarding world would reach unparalleled heights. The fact that it required the death of the boy was regretful, but necessary.

The boy being here with his relatives for the summer, in conjunction with a stay at the Burrow beginning after his next birthday, would ensure that he was impressionable to Dumbledore’s own subtle wisdom and influence. It was all part of his master plan. The fact that the boy had run off simply couldn’t be allowed to be tolerated. No, this *independent* streak had to be squashed quickly.

A way forward was instantly found. A simple memory modification on the Dursleys would allow the boy to return to where he was supposed to be. Then he needed to get to the Ministry and the hearing, sweep away this minor inconvenience, ensuring Harry’s awe and gratitude, deal with the boy’s misguided independence and then return him to where he belonged.

With a last stroke of his beard, Dumbledore turned his wand to the three befuddled muggles sitting in front of him.

-oOoOo-

Harry sat nervously outside the room within the Department of Improper Use of Magic where he’d been told to wait. According to his watch, the trial was due to start in ten minutes. He really wasn’t sure if he’d be able to stay seated quietly that long. Already his left leg was bouncing rapidly all by itself. Even holding it with both hands couldn’t keep it completely still.

“Mister Potter, you may come in now,” the stern brown haired woman who’d introduced herself earlier as Madam Hopkirk instructed.

Hopping up from his chair, Harry cautiously made his way through the door. Swallowing through his suddenly dry throat, he looked around.

The room was fairly small with a long bench-like desk intersecting it into two. A single hard-backed chair sat in the middle of what remained of the side of the room closest to the door. On the opposite side of the bench, he could make out three chairs. An additional chair was placed to the right side of the desk. At Madam Hopkirk’s direction, he sat in the single chair closest to him.

He watched as Madam Hopkirk rounded the bench before taking the centre seat. A folder full of
parchment was opened and she began shuffling through them. The sound of the door opening behind him spun Harry around in time to see two more people enter.

The first was a young man in deep plum robes. He carried a sheaf of parchment, a couple of quills and bottles of ink to the side chair where he began setting up ready to take notes. Harry guessed that he was a secretary or scribe of some kind, obviously only just out of Hogwarts.

The second person caused the tightness in his chest to loosen slightly. Madam Bones gave him a brief nod as she rounded the desk to take the seat to Madam Hopkirk’s right.

When everyone was seated, Madam Hopkirk looked to the young man, nodded and began to speak.

“Very well. Let’s begin.”

Unfortunately, the beginning of the trial was delayed as the door opened once more. Harry turned in his chair to see a squat woman in a ghastly pink cardigan and an insipid smile on her face waddle into the room.

“Undersecretary Umbridge, I wasn’t aware that you were attending this hearing against underage magic,” Madam Hopkirk stated, her eyebrows high on her forehead.

“The Minister thought that it would be advantageous to learn more about Mister Potter,” Madam Umbridge replied in a surprisingly high girlish voice.

“To what purpose, Delores?” Madam Bones asked.

“Why it’s quite simple, Amelia,” Umbridge replied. “Wholly upon his word, you have the entire Department of Magical Law Enforcement scurrying around, requisitioning money and resources and even have Azkaban in the process of completely unnecessary changes because of his delusion that the Dark Lord is still among the living.”

Madam Bones frowned so deeply that it looked as though her monocle was cutting into her skin.

“Mister Potter is simply one of dozens of witnesses that I’ve interviewed. Minister Fudge knows this and the changes that I’ve authorised for the upgrading of my department are necessary if we’re ever forced into another wizarding war the like of which we only escaped with Mister Potter’s intervention.”

“I guess that we shall see,” Umbridge smiled sweetly as she continued forward, rounded the bench and took the remaining seat.

“This hearing in regards to the improper use of magic, specifically, in regards to the breaking of the Decree for Underage Magic by the defendant, Harry James Potter is now in session,” Madam Hopkirk began. “There are two instances that will be investigated at today’s hearing. In attendance are Mafalda Hopkirk, Chair of the Department of Improper Use of Magic, Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Delores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, Court Scribe Joseph Delany and the defendant, Harry James Potter.

“Mister Potter, Madam Bones, Madam Umbridge, we will discuss each instance separately before a decision and ruling is declared.”

Here Madam Hopkirt paused as she looked down at her notes.

“The first instance that is recorded against Mister Potter is a hover charm that was performed at Mister Potter’s place of residence on the thirty-first of July at twelve minutes past nine in the evening. A letter of warning was issued to Mister Potter at this time. Is there anything that you’d like to say in
“It wasn’t me,” Harry stated in as clear a voice as possible. “It was a house elf called Dobby.”

“Hem hem.” Madam Umbridge cleared her throat in the weirdest way that Harry’d ever heard. “Did I understand you to say that you’re blaming a house elf for your violation? I was under the impression that you lived with muggles.”

“I do live with muggles – my aunt, uncle and cousin,” Harry replied as politely as he could. “But this house elf turned up to talk to me and he’s the one who performed the hover charm.”

“What would a house elf perform magic in your house in front of muggles? Was this some misguided attempt to impress your relatives?” Madam Hopkirk asked.

“No,” Harry shook his head violently. “Believe me, none of my relatives would be impressed by magic. I don’t even know that elf. He just turned up. And he levitated that cake to try to stop me from going back to Hogwarts.”

“It seems to me that, if true, the elf may get his wish,” Umbridge said in her high girlish voice.

“Mister Potter, do you know the owners of the house elf?” Madam Bones asked.

Once again Harry shook his head, “no, I don’t.”

He wanted to add that Madam Bones already knew that, but for some reason, he assumed that Madam Bones didn’t want it known that they’d already discussed this event in her office.

“To summarise,” Madam Hopkirk stated, looking down at the parchment that she’d been making notes on, “a hover charm was performed in your home, a place where you are the only known magical in residence and your only defence is that an unknown house elf visited you and performed the charm, not you as we first thought?”

“Yes, Madam Hopkirk,” Harry replied, his heart sinking at the clear disbelief in her voice.

“Very well, we shall move on to the second violation of the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Magic that you are accused of,” Madam Hopkirk said, shuffling her parchments. “This violation occurred at ten past seven on the morning of the third of August at the residence of Miss Hermione Granger in Crawley. In this instance, the magic performed was in the form of a magical oath.”

Just then, the door behind Harry burst open causing him to whip his head around so fast that his neck momentarily hurt. Framed in the doorway, dressed in lurid purple and gold robes, was his Headmaster. His gaze swept the room before he regally strode in, twirled his wand to conjure a plush red armchair and plonked himself down beside Harry.

“Sorry I’m late,” Professor Dumbledore stated, his eyes twinkling at all those present, “I was unfortunately delayed. I trust that I haven’t missed anything too important?”

“I was not aware that you were joining us, Albus?” Madam Hopkirk stated in a cold tone.

“Young Harry here is entitled to representation and what better person than his magical guardian?” Dumbledore smiled.

Harry stared at the old man seated beside him. This was the one Professor McGonagall had assured him would make sure that his living conditions with the Durselys would be better. His face darkened as an endless parade of chores, empty plates, bars on windows, locks on doors and cat-flaps marched...
across his mind’s eye.

Whatever he’d done, assuming that he’d actually even bothered to try doing anything at all, had only made living with the Dursleys hell on Earth. There was no way that Harry was ever going to trust him again. And he was supposed to be his magical guardian? He wondered how in the world that had happened. And why he’d never been told before.

“I’m afraid, Albus, that we’ve already finished discussing Mister Potter’s first offence and, in fact, we were just in the process of beginning the investigation into his second offence,” Madam Hopkirk scowled.

A wave of an ancient hand indicated that Dumbledore was content for the matter to proceed.

“As I was about to say,” Madam Hopkirk said after a few seconds of hard staring at Dumbledore, “upon the detection of the magic, a letter was issued to one Hermione Jane Granger. A return letter was received by Mister Potter stating that he was currently visiting Miss Granger and that the magic that was performed was actually performed by him. Is this correct?”

“Yes, Madam Hopkirk,” Harry replied.

“Why were you at Miss Granger’s house?” Dumbledore asked looking at him.

Harry shrugged. There was no way that he was going to tell him about his personal business. “Hermione’s my best friend and I was visiting her.”

“Your magic was reported to be a magical vow. Could you enlighten us as to the nature of the vow that you took?” Madam Bones asked.

“It was an accident,” Harry stated quickly. “I was upset and didn’t even realise that I’d made it until we saw the light erupt from my wand.”

Madam Bones nodded but struck him with a piercing look. “Thank you for that explanation, Mister Potter, but you didn’t answer my question.”

“Sorry, Madam Bones,” Harry replied. “I vowed that I’d rather give up my magic than spend another night at Privet Dive with the Dursleys.”

Beside him, Dumbledore started and sat up straighter in his chair. “Surely you didn’t mean that, my boy?”

“I certainly did,” Harry scowled. “I never want to go back again.”

“I’m sure that we can come to some understanding that will allow you to return to your relatives,” Dumbledore stated, a faint edge of hardness in his tone.

“The contents of the vow are immaterial at this present time,” Madam Hopkirk stated, cutting off Harry’s angry retort. “The fact that we’re currently investigating is the casting of the vow. You said that you made the vow unintentionally?”

“Unintentionally or not, the fact remains that it was made,” Madam Umbridge said, a small smile on her lips.

“I didn’t mean to. And like I said, I didn’t even know that I was doing it,” Harry replied before pulling out an envelope from the pocket of his robe. Getting up, he approached the bench. “This is a letter from Mister and Mrs Granger. They were there when it happened.”
Madam Hopkirk glanced quizzically at the envelope for a moment before opening it and reading through the letter inside. A thoughtful expression appeared on her face as she passed the letter to Madam Bones.

“And what do you expect us to do with this letter from these muggles?” Madam Umbridge asked after she’d read the letter.

“We take the letter into consideration,” Madam Bones answered firmly. “This eyewitness account not only verifies Mister Potter’s claims that the vow was made unintentionally, but it also quite clearly stipulates that Mister Potter was very quick to take responsibility for the accidental magic.”

“I’m sure that a case of accidental magic from such a young boy is easy to dismiss,” Dumbledore smiled at the three witches.

“Perhaps, Albus, but don’t forget that we’re dealing with two cases of violation of the Decree by Mister Potter that happened within the space of three days,” Madam Hopkirk replied. “Does anyone else have any questions for Mister Potter? No? Then it’s time to judge this case. Madam Bones, would you like to give us your opinion?”

Madam Bones sat back in her chair as she contemplated Harry. “One case where Mister Potter states that the magic wasn’t his, coupled with the clear case of taking responsibility for a second case of accidental magic leads me to believe the defendant. My opinion is that a warning will suffice in this instance.”

“Madam Umbridge?”

“It’s quite clear to me that Mister Potter has broken the rules and needs to be punished. It is only the severity of the punishment that needs to be decided in my opinion. Expulsion from Hogwarts would not be too severe, I believe;” she smiled sweetly.

Beside him, Harry felt Dumbledore shift uneasily in his chair.

“While your conclusion is correct in its succinctness, Madam Umbridge, I feel that I am leaning towards Madam Bones’ opinion in my ruling,” Madam Hopkirk stated. “Mister Potter. A note and a warning shall be made in your file. Two breaches of the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry within three days is far too many. Any further breach, be they intentional or accidental, will result in a much harsher penalty being applied. Do you understand?”

Harry stared at her before nodding dumbly. He wasn’t expelled. He wasn’t going to have his magic taken away from him. But she’d basically just told him that it could very well happen in the future.

“In that case, I declare this hearing at an end. You are free to go, Mister Potter.”

Shakily, Harry got to his feet, only to feel a hand grasp his elbow.

“Harry, my boy,” he began before being interrupted by the Head of the Magical Law Enforcement. “Chief Warlock, I need to discuss with you a trial date for a criminal that we’ve recently apprehended.”

“And who might that be, Madam Bones?” Dumbledore asked as he attempted to steer Harry towards the door.

“Peter Pettigrew.”
The instant that Harry felt Dumbledore’s grasp loosen in his shock, he scampered. Madam Bones, he knew, would fill him in later on Pettigrew’s trial and how that affected their aim to get Sirius freed from Azkaban. Evading Dumbledore was much more important at the moment.

-oOoOo-

“I don’t know what to do, Slipshard,” Harry sighed some time later that afternoon.

The old goblin regarded him calmly, his long fingers steepled in front of him.

“You have summed up your potential problems quite nicely, Harry, so what remains is deciding what it is that you not only need but want to happen in the event that the worst comes to pass,” Slipshard stated. “So, I ask you, Harry, what is it that you most want?”

“I want … I want somewhere safe where they can’t find me and take away my magic,” he replied as he met the goblin’s gaze.

Slipshard nodded as he considered the statement. “And if this worst comes to pass while you are still in Hogwarts, what are your desires for your magical education?”

“Oh course, I want to keep learning magic,” Harry replied, shocked that there could be any other option.

Once again, Slipshard sat back and contemplated the boy before him. He turned the problem over and over until, finally, a slow grin spread across his face.

“That answer may just give us possibilities …” he began.
“Good morning, Harry. All packed?”

Pausing in the doorway, Harry looked around for the source of the voice and found Beth standing in one of the aisles off to his left. Smiling, he made his way towards her.

“Yeah, all ready,” he replied. “Thought I’d come down and take one last look around before it’s time to go.”

He watched as Beth finished slotting the small pile of books in her hands onto the bookshelf before moving across to the small trolley at the far end of the aisle.

Hermione’s Book Nook had done exceptionally well in the ten days that it’d been open. A steady stream of people had visited the shop and it seemed that whether they’d originally been drawn in by the books or by the cakes and tea, their curiosity had extended to the other part of the store as well. Not everyone who came in had bought anything, but most did. Hogwarts students, once word had got around that they could sell their old textbooks, had been some of their most frequent customers, selling and buying books by the dozen.

The only hiccup that they’d had was the day that Lord Pemberton had decided to make an appearance. Harry’d actually been manning the counter when the old pudgy gentleman had sauntered in, a cane swinging from one hand. His loud disparaging remarks about them ‘stealing the books of pure-bloods’ and ‘selling muggle filth’ had caused something in Harry to snap.

He’d faced down the man, letting him know in as loud a voice as he’d ever used that this was a shop owned by the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter and more specifically by The-Boy-Who-Lived. Lord Pemberton had left very quickly after that and, once the surging crowd that the spectacle had brought in had been served, Harry had sneaked off to find a nice quite corner upstairs to hunker down in and shake uncontrollably for the next half hour until his nerves settled.

“I have something for you,” Beth smiled, bringing him back to the present.

Harry cocked his head.

“I believe that our agreement was that as the owner, you’d receive three books from the store on the first of every month? Today’s the first of September,” Beth reminded him.

Walking over to the main counter, she picked up a small pile of books and turned back to face him.

“Here you are, good Sir,” she said.

Eagerly, Harry took the books. They were all obviously old, all hard covered books, but still in reasonably good condition.

“This one’s to help you with your studies,” she said, pointing to the book called *Human Transfiguration Techniques for the Novice*. “I know that you’ve been interested in finding out about other magical cultures, so I thought that you might find this one interesting,” she said, pulling out the second book that he saw was titled *Maori Magic*. “And the last one is for pleasure.” Harry smiled at *The Complete Works of Sherlock Holmes*.

“Thanks, Beth, they’re great,” he beamed. “I better go put them in my trunk. And then send Hedwig off to Hogwarts.”
“Have a great term, Harry,” Beth said before pulling him into a brief unexpected hug.

-oOoOo-

The taxi fare from Charing Cross Road to King’s Cross Station was a lot less than Harry’d anticipated. With a shrug, he stuffed the extra notes into his wallet before tucking the wallet away into a pocket of his cargo pants. Slapping a different pocket to make sure that his shrunken trunk was still in place, Harry walked into the gigantic train station.

Knowing that he was incredibly early, a fact that he’d planned, he made his way towards Platform Nine. There, he spied a lone seat that he quickly claimed for himself. While he knew that he could go straight to the Hogwarts’ Express, he decided to wait for his friends.

“Hey, Harry!”

With a blink, he pulled his head out of Sherlock Holmes to find a round faced boy smiling at him. Behind him stood a tall severe looking woman wearing a vulture on her head.

“Hey, Neville. How was your holiday?”

“Good. Gran let me take over one of our greenhouses, so I spent most of my time in there,” Neville beamed. “How was yours?”

Harry smiled back as he imagined Neville lost in his own world, sort of like he always was in Herbology, but only more intense.

“It was … eventful, Neville. I’ll tell you all about it on the Express,” he replied before looking over Neville’s shoulder. “Hello, Madam Longbottom, it’s nice to see you again.”

Madam Longbottom gave a regal bow of her head. “And you as well, Mister Potter. Unfortunately, I have a rather pressing appointment with the Wizengamot. I take it that I can trust you both to get onto the station by yourselves?”

“Of course, Gran,” Neville replied.

With a last hard look at them, followed by a stiff nod she said, “have a good term, Neville. I’ll see you at Christmas.”

Her disappearance into a dark corner of the station was eclipsed by the sight of a bushy-haired witch racing at the two of them.

“Harry! Neville!”

“Hey, Hermione,” Harry beamed, standing up to greet her.

“Hi, Hermione,” Neville smiled.

“Hello, Harry. I see that you made it okay,” Mrs Granger said.

“Hi, Mrs Granger,” Harry replied.

“Mum, this is our friend, Neville Longbottom,” Hermione introduced.

“Hello, Neville, it’s nice to meet you,” she smiled.

“Hi, Mrs Granger, it’s nice to meet you, too,” Neville said shyly.
“Well, shall we go through and find a compartment together?” Hermione asked, taking control of the trolley from her mother.

As Hermione and her mum hugged their goodbyes, Harry walked across to the hidden barrier between platforms nine and ten that allowed magicals access to Platform Nine and Three Quarters. Glancing around to make sure that there were no muggles around, Harry casually leant on the wall, expecting to instantly fall through.

The reality, though, was completely different. For some reason, the wall was simply that, a wall. Turning more fully towards it, Harry placed both hands flat on the wall and pushed, but nothing happened.

“Oh, guys?” Harry frowned.

“What’s the matter, Harry?” Neville asked.

“The wall won’t let me through,” he replied.

“What? That’s not possible,” Hermione stated.

Leaving her trolley behind, she joined Harry and tested the wall for herself.

“I don’t understand. It’s not supposed to do that,” she finally said.

In the small time that they were trying to get through, their little part of the station had begun to fill up. A couple of older students pushed through, but their attempts to access the hidden station also failed. Not knowing what else to do, Harry, Hermione and Neville backed up out of the way to rejoin Mrs Granger.

They watched as first older students, and then some parents all attempted unsuccessfully to breach the wall. One older wizard, well shielded by those surrounding him, attempted using his wand to spell the gateway open. But that, too, ended in defeat.

Gradually, more and more people, Hogwarts students, their parents and siblings, gathered until that part of the station looked as though a mob had invaded it.

“Excuse me, Harry Potter?”

Harry looked up to find a tall aristocratic looking man with thinning black hair and sharp piercing eyes looking down at him. Nervously, he nodded.

“My name is Cyrus Greengrass,” the man stated before moving his arm to allow his daughter, Daphne, to be seen standing behind him. “I was wondering if you had a moment to talk?”

After sharing a look with both Hermione and Neville, Harry nodded and followed the two Greengrasses towards a pillar away from the crowd.

“Mister Potter … Harry … may I call you Harry?” at Harry’s nod, he continued. “You of course know my daughter, Daphne.”

“Yes, Sir,” he replied before switching his gaze to the blonde girl. “Hi, Daphne, how are you?”

A small smile grew on Daphne’s face as she met his eyes. “I’m good, Harry. It’s nice to see you again.”

Harry looked back up to see a pleased expression on Mister Greengrass’ face.
“Harry, I wanted to take this opportunity to personally thank you for what you did for both Daphne and Tracey Davis. Without your selfless heroics, my Daphne would have been lost to us.”

“It was nothing, Sir, anyone would have done it. I just happened to be the closest,” Harry said.

“No, there I think you’ll find that you’re wrong,” Mister Greengrass countered. “What you did was quite out of the ordinary and for that you have not only my thanks and the thanks for my entire family, but also a debt that we can never pay.”

Harry blushed but remained quiet, not knowing how to respond to that.

“Mister Potter,” Mister Greengrass continued, “As Head of House Greengrass, I formally acknowledge the life debt that exists between yourself and my daughter. To that end, I would like to formally ally the House of Greengrass with the House of Potter.”

“Th…thank you, Sir,” Harry stuttered, feeling completely out of his depth and knowing that he’d be quizzing Neville later. “An alliance between our two houses sounds good.”

The beaming smile that flashes across the older wizard’s face told Harry that he’d answered correctly. Beside him, Daphne seemed to let out a sigh of relief.

“If you were a little older,” Mister Greengrass said, leaning down to whisper in his ear so that his daughter couldn’t hear, “perhaps we could find a way to tie our families a little closer together, hey? But for now, friendship is a good start, I think.”

Harry’s eyes widened at the implication and he shuffled away from Daphne. “Ah, yeah, ah, friendship sounds good to me, too, Sir.”

“Oh look,” Daphne interrupted, “it looks like they’re taking everyone through the emergency worker’s entrance to get onto the platform.”

Harry swivelled around to see a long line forming in front of what looked like an old maintenance hatch.

Hermione and Neville both waving at him formed the perfect excuse for Harry to extract himself from Mister Greengrass’ ‘closer’ thoughts.

“Ah, my friends are waiting for me,” he said. “It was nice to meet you, Mister Greengrass. I’ll see you later Daphne.”

With that, he escaped, barely managing to restrain himself from running away.

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By the time that the trolley lady had gone past and Harry, Hermione and Neville had eaten their fill, Harry was finally at a point where he was happy to stop peppering Neville with questions.

He thought that he now had it all straight in his mind. At the very least, he hoped so. And the fact that he had years to make sure definitely settled his whirling mind and nerves. Their discussion, with the occasional pointed question of clarification from Hermione, had been solely fixated on House Alliances and wizarding marriages.

House Alliances, like the one that House Potter and House Greengrass seemed to have just entered into, seemed to be more about mutual convenience than anything else. This was especially true in business dealings and when it came to voting on wizarding law in the Wizengamot.
Wizarding marriages, for the most part, were very similar to their muggle counterparts. Witches and wizards were able to choose who they wanted to marry for themselves. When it came down to it, only the old pure-blood families and the wannabes still dabbled in betrothal contracts. It was this last that Harry and Neville were sure that Mister Greengrass had been hinting at. But as Neville had told Harry the previous year, only the Heads of Houses could arrange betrothal contracts and, as Harry couldn’t take up his Head of House duties until he came of age, there was no way that any contract could be formulated.

Harry was immensely relieved to hear Neville reiterate that fact. The little that he’d had to do with Daphne had shown him that she was nice girl, but that’s as far as it went. He had zero interest in her being his girlfriend, let alone anything more than that.

“I’m never going to sign a betrothal contract,” Harry finally vowed as the conversation finally came to its conclusion, “not for me and not for anyone in my family once I’m Head either.”

The door opening in the middle of this statement startled the three of them, but Harry wasn’t sure whose faces were more red – the three of them or Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott who had just entered.

“Um, hope we’re not interrupting something,” Susan said.

“No, we’ve just been discussing wizarding customs,” Hermione replied. “How were your holidays, Susan, Hannah?”

“They were good,” Susan smiled.

Hannah nodded in agreement. “We spent most of it together.”

“Harry, my aunt asked me to give you this to you,” Susan said.

Standing up, he crossed the compartment to take the envelope. “Thanks, Susan.”

“Are we going to study together again this year?” Hermione asked.

“Definitely,” Hannah stated. “Lil, Sally-Ann, Terry and Kevin were already talking about it earlier.”

“We’ll see you guys later, then,” Susan said and with a small wave, the two girls closed the door behind them on their way out.

As soon as they were gone, Harry ripped open the envelope and sped read through the letter.

“What is it, Harry?” Hermione asked, seeing the wide smile on his face.

Harry looked up at his two closest friends. “It’s from Amelia Bones, the Head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement. She wanted to tell me that the trial of Peter Pettigrew is set for the third. That’s two days from now. She says that she’s quietly confident that it’ll be a very short trial with Pettigrew being found guilty quickly and that that’ll lead to getting Sirius out of Azkaban by the end of the week.”

“Ah, Harry? I thought Pettigrew and Sirius were your dad’s friends?” a confused Neville asked.

Harry grinned at him. “That’s right, I haven’t told you about what I found out over the holidays. You see, I decided to go see Madam Bones …”

-oOoOo-
“Hey, did either of you three see Ron on the train?” Fred asked, sliding into a seat across from Harry. 

Harry stared at the peculiar expression of anxiousness plastered on both twins’ faces. At the shaking of their heads, the twins shared an ominous look before George explained.

“We got to the station at the last minute. Apparently, Ron left his wand in the car and went back for it so we don’t know if he realised that the barrier to get onto Platform Nine and Three Quarters was acting up and that we had to use the worker’s entrance.”

“We’re just hoping that he didn’t get left behind,” Fred continued.

“Yeah, imagine having to spend the year with mum?” George shuddered.

Their banter was cut off as Professor McGonagall led the first years into the Great Hall. Harry watched interestedly as the thirty or forty new students lined up in front of the teacher’s table. The old ratty-looking Sorting Hat was placed on the three legged stool and was stared at while it sung its song before beginning its duty of sorting the students.

Harry clapped loudly as the first new Gryffindor, a little mousey-haired boy named Colin Creevey, was sorted. The only other new student that caught his attention was a red-haired girl that was applauded enthusiastically and wolf-whistled at by the twins – their sister, Ginny.

Dinner was more than half over and already Harry was beginning to long for his four-poster bed up in Gryffindor Tower when an almighty crash that was more on the order of a small explosion rocked the Hall. Harry, along with everyone else, swung around to look out of the window, but whatever had caused it was hidden in the darkness.
Wiggling slightly on the old coil of rope to something a bit more comfortable, Harry settled himself and his supplies, ready for some important work. The old board that he used as a desk in his secret cupboard was laid once more upon his lap. Quills, ink bottles and parchment were at the ready. On the floor beside him was the silver Goblin Postal Service box, placed so that the owl motif on top of could be seen even from the corner of his eye.

Knowing that he was ready for what he planned to do, Harry picked up the old copy of *The Daily Prophet* that he’d kept and flipped through it to the advertisements. His eye roamed down the page, picking out the three that interested him the most. Now it was simply a matter of crafting his own ads.

Dropping the folded-back paper into his lap, he leant back, hands interlocked behind his head. With unseeing eyes, he thought back over the last three days of lessons. Most, of course, simply picked up from where they’d left off the previous year.

Professor Flitwick was his usual effervescent self, managing to make charms seem almost more like a game than a learning experience. Professor Sinistra’s midnight astronomy class the night before had unfortunately been cut short due to clouds obscuring the part of the sky that they were trying to observe.

Herbology had been slightly more challenging which only made sense to Harry. In all his years of gardening for Aunt Petunia, he’d never come across a plant or weed that decided to fight back and flat out refuse to do as it was told to like the baby mandrakes that they were dealing with in their very first lesson of the year. It’d taken not only ear-muffs to block out their cries, but also thick dragon-hide gloves to protect his fingers from their strong gums to survive the lesson.

History of Magic, Harry suspected, hadn’t changed its formula for hundreds of years. Or, at least, since *well* before Professor Binn’s death. The ghost’s monotonous recital of the text book was enough to put almost anyone to sleep within the first five minutes. Harry himself had slept through most of the previous year’s lessons.

But this year, he had a plan. Using a set of earmuffs not unlike the ones that they’d used in Herbology, he tuned out the dry delivery and used the lesson as an extra study period. Between their assigned book and the ones that he’d picked up in Diagon Alley, Harry planned on studying the subject at his own pace. He trusted that either Neville or Hermione would let him know when the bell went at the end of the lesson.

Transfiguration though, while remaining the same in what was expected, had an element of difference to it. Professor McGonagall remained the consummate stern task-master. When Harry trudged into the classroom, his eyes slid immediately to the far back table, a place that he felt instantly drawn to. His hesitation must have transmitted itself, though, for, no sooner had he slowed, than Hermione’s chocolate eyes pierced his own and, with a small frown, she drew him forward to their usual table.

He may have been sitting where he was. He may have been taking his usual notes. He may have even been performing the required new spell (turning a shallow bowl of water into a mirror) with his usual focus and achieving it only seconds after Hermione, earning Gryffindor five points. But there was one thing that he was *not* doing. The entire time that he was in the classroom, including the start of the lesson when Professor McGonagall was in full lecture mode, he flat out refused to look at her.
Once upon a time, Professor McGonagall had been his favourite teacher. At Hermione’s urging, he’d even taken some of his problems to her and felt a strange sort of warmth when she’d not only listened, but helped him. But that was before the summer holidays. Before she’d assured him that she’d look into it and that Headmaster Dumbledore would make sure that his relatives would treat him better. Before the locks on the door. Before the bars on the window. Before the cat-flap designed to allow a meagre portion of food. Before being locked up tight while his relatives simply drove away.

No more. He’d decided that long before coming back to Hogwarts. He’d trusted her and she’d proved herself someone who couldn’t be trusted. Perhaps not to the extent that Dumbledore had, especially after he’d tried to force him back to the Dursleys for the last couple of days of the holiday, but still untrustworthy nonetheless.

However grudgingly it was, Harry had to admit that she was a good teacher. And she was his Head of House. But that didn’t mean that he had any intention of interacting with her any more than he had to.

Hermione’d instantly picked up on the negative vibe that he was giving off. That was the main reason that he was once again hiding out in the tiny cupboard that he’d taken refuge in last year. That was one conversation that he was not looking forward to.

And then there’d been Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts …

-oOoOo-

“Welcome to Defence Against the Dark Arts. Your teacher this year will be … me! Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, third class, honorary member of The Dark Force Defence League and five times winner of Witch Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award.”

Here, the lilac cloaked professor with short plum cape artfully draped over one shoulder, smiled that charming smile. To Harry, it was all teeth, perfectly white teeth that sparkled with a ting that reminded him of that infuriating sparkle that Dumbledore always had in the corner of his eye.

Beside him, Hermione was leaning forward on her desk, her chin resting on one hand. She seemed captivated by the guy, a fact that he put down to those perfect teeth – her parents were dentists, after all.

“I trust that everyone here has a copy of the textbooks?” Professor Lockhart asked as he descended from the steps leading up to his office where he’d been posed for his introduction.

The mumbles and nods from the boys in the class were accompanied by the sighs and hair flipping created by the eager nods of the girls.

For his part, Harry looked at his pile of books on the desk. Over the last week of the holidays, he’d opened the first one, *Gadding with Ghouls*. By the time that he’d finished it, he’d been gobsmacked. Either Lockhart was the most accomplished Dark Forces Defence wizard in existence or he was the best fiction writer that he’d ever encountered. He simply found the book that polarising. Everything in it was so sensational, so amazing, that it was hard to believe.

He’d immediately picked up the second one *Marauding with Monsters* and then a third, a fourth and within two days, he’d read them all. He still didn’t know what to think, whether to believe it all or not. Finally, he decided to wait until he’d met the man himself and decide from there.

While he’d been lost in his reminiscing, Lockhart had moved on to taking the roll. Every girl was
given a wink, eliciting a giggle from said girl. Including Hermione. Harry stared at his best friend. He had no idea what had come over her. Meeting Neville’s eyes on the far side of her, they shared a shake of their heads before turning back to Lockhart.

“Harry Potter,” Lockhart smiled his toothy smile. “I’m sure the two of us have many stories to share. The joys of being a celebrity, eh, Harry?”

Harry stared. The joys of being a celebrity? That wasn’t something that he’d encountered yet. Unless the guy found being stared at and whispered about all the time a joy?

“To begin our lesson, I thought that we’d start with a little quiz I’ve devised to see how many of you have read ahead in your texts.”

Unlike every other teacher at Hogwarts who preferred to use their wand and a spell, Lockhart then picked up the pile of papers on his desk and walked around the room, handing out each one individually.

“You have forty minutes. Off you go,” he instructed.

Running his eye down the page, Harry saw that every single question was about Lockhart himself. What’s his favourite colour? What year was he first awarded Witch Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award? On and on they went. After having read the books, he thought that he knew most of the answers, but none of the questions dealt with Defence Against the Dark Arts in the slightest. With a feeling of rising dread, he flipped the page over and scanned those questions. But every single one of them was simply more of the same.

Glancing back up at the teacher’s desk, Harry found Lockhart perched on one corner; his plum-coloured cape draped over one shoulder as he smiled and winked at his students.

With a sigh of defeat, Harry picked up his quill and set to work.

The aftermath of the quiz was almost as horrendous as taking the quiz in the first place. Every single question had to be discussed and answered correctly, leaving a swooning Hermione in its wake as the sole person to get all one hundred and fifty questions correct.

“And now I believe that it’s time to introduce you to the first of the dangerous creatures that you’re likely to meet. But have no fear,” Lockhart continued, “while you’re with me in this classroom, no harm can befall you.”

With a flourish, he whipped off the cover of the cage that Harry hadn’t noticed sitting under the side windows.

“Cornish Pixies!” Seamus Finnegan’s voice rose in disbelief above the rest of the class. “What’s dangerous about Cornish Pixies?”

The cage in question was filled with dozens of tiny blue creatures. Each one was four or five inches tall with long fingers and toes and what looked to be gossamer thin wings on their backs.

“Well, Mister Finnegan, let’s see what you make of a colony of Cornish Pixies then, hmm,” Lockhart retorted before, after one last teeth-flashing smile, he unlocked the door to the cage with a key.

At once, pandemonium erupted throughout the classroom.

Tiny blue flashes zipped here and there, causing as much chaos as possible. Books, quills and ink
bottles were tossed about. Half the students disappeared under their desks, only peeking out when they thought that it was safe. Girls’ screams pierced the din as their hair was caught in long blue fingers and pulled. Neville and Su Li were swarmed on mass and lifted high into the air to soar above their classmates.

“A little more dangerous than one would first think judging on their appearance, wouldn’t you say, Mister Finnegan?” Lockhart asked. “But not to fear. Let me show you how to deal with these pesky little fellows. *Immobulus!*”

The freezing charm, for that’s what Harry recognised it as, zipped off across the classroom, completely missing the pixies and having no effect whatsoever. In fact the closest pixie was well over two metres away. Lockhart’s second attempt at the charm, though, definitely had some effect.

The blue spell zipped off, completely missed the grouping of five pixies, before bouncing off of the brass light fixture. The rebounding spell caught Dean Thomas in the back, freezing him in place, that was until a pixie gleefully landed on him and knocked him flat on his face with a sickening *crunch*.

The pixies, of course, took having a spell fired at them with extreme prejudice. Seven of them angrily zipped at the professor and attacked him mercilessly. His wand was ripped from his fingers before being thrown out of the window. Sharp claws emerged and raked along one cheek, eliciting a shriek more shrill than any of the ones that the girls in the classroom had been making. Three grabbed handfuls of hair and got more than they bargained for when a blonde wig tore off in their hands.

That, it seemed, was a straw too far for the beleaguered Professor. With a parting, “I’ll just leave you to pop them back into their cage, then,” he vanished up the stairs and into his office with a slammed door.

“Well, come on then, he showed us what to do,” Hermione rounded on her classmates.

“What? Run away and hide?” Ron replied, but only loud enough for Harry to hear.

With a nod of agreement followed by a sigh of resignation, Harry rose into a crouch and took careful aim.

“*Immobulus.*”

-oOoOo-

Harry experienced an uncommon feeling of relief walking through the door to the potions lab. It wasn’t that he was glad to be back in Snape’s domain where he expected the first insult of the year the instant that Snape’s black cloak billowed through the door. No, it was more that, after the fiasco that was Defence Against the Dark Arts, Potions was a known quantity with, dare he even think it, a teacher that actually made sure that some learning took place.

The instant that Snape strode into the room, Harry flinched. Stealing a glance at the potion’s master, he paused and waited. And waited some more. Snape quickly and efficiently took the roll. Bizarrely, there wasn’t even a flicker of hesitation when Harry’s name was called.

“You’re now second years. That means that there’ll be none of the useless hand-holding from last year,” Snape said, his quiet voice holding the class’ attention even in the face of the blatant questioning looks, particularly from the Gryffindors, as to when they’d ever received any kind of assistance.

A sharp jab at the board from Snape’s wand produced the potion for the day.
“There are your instructions. Get to work.”

As Harry started forward to collect the extra ingredients from the stores cupboard, his eyes inadvertently met Snape’s. An imperceptible nod came from Snape’s head before he looked away and strode off towards his Slytherins.

And that was it as far as interaction between Harry and Professor Snape went for the entire lesson. Even when Snape was billowing around, peering and sneering at the progress the class was making, he avoided Harry’s own cauldron. The closest he ever came was when he gave Hermione beside him and Neville behind him a once over.

By the end of the lesson, Harry had produced a potion that was almost identical to the shade of green that the control potion on Snape’s desk was.

As he walked out, Harry couldn’t help but look back. Once again, Snape seemed to instinctively avoid looking at him. With a shrug, he continued. Whatever the reason for it, he wasn’t going to complain. And, as he and Neville had already proven the year before, when left alone, he was quite good at potion making.

-oOoOo-

With a small shake, Harry came back to the present.

Before the school year, he’d been considering hiring three private tutors for himself. In fact, he’d already written up the ad for *The Daily Prophet* that he wanted to place for what he’d decided to call Magical Cultures of the World. Whether or not he’d be able to find someone to tutor him (and perhaps even one or two of his friends) in not only different magical communities from different countries, but also covering topics like house elves, goblins, centaurs and other species, he had no idea.

But of the other two tutors, he decided to scrap one. If Professor Snape truly had changed how he was going to deal with him, then Harry was content to continue in his class. He figured that, even with Snape ignoring him, he was still likely to pick up some tips and tricks from the potion master.

Defence Against the Dark Arts, though, was a completely different matter. Quirrell’s stutter made understanding anything he’d said problematic at best, so Harry wasn’t feeling confident that he’d learnt everything that he could last year. And after Lockhart’s disaster of a lesson, he highly doubted that he’d learn anything this year.

Picking up his quill, he slowly began drafting away.

*Wanted.*

*Tutor in the subject of Defence Against the Dark Arts.*

*Instruction will be given to a 2nd year Hogwarts student(s) covering both first and second year topics in the subject area at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

*Please apply with a list of qualifications, credentials and references.*

*All correspondence to be addressed to Harry Potter.*

Harry smiled as he read through his seventh draft. He particularly liked the ‘s’ that he’d included in case Neville wanted to join him as well. Somehow, Harry doubted that Hermione would want to leave learning from Lockhart.
A steady pulse of white light caught his attention out of the corner of his eye causing him to drop the parchment. Eagerly he snatched up the Goblin Postal Service box. If he was right, inside should be a letter from Madam Bones telling him what had happened at Pettigrew’s trial.
Chapter 15

A single sharp rap of the gavel was all that it took to quiet the hundreds of people.

Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, studiously avoided fiddling with the thick files piled neatly to one side of the small desk in front of her. Instead, she used the opportunity to peer around the large, tiered circular court room.

A hundred and one seats, situated across the lower three tiers, ringed the clear stone area set aside for the accused. Nearly every seat was filled with the Head of either an Ancient House, a Noble House or by the holder of an Order of Merlin, first class. Of the seats that were missing their Head, either due to the heir being too young or for some other reason, she held hopes that one, at least, would be filled by the end of the day.

Above the three tiers reserved for the Wizengamot, rose a further five tiers, all set aside for the public. To her left, on the lowest of those tiers, congregated the press contingent. She frowned as she noticed the slight pushing and shoving that was going on as each one tried to find the best position to both see and hear the coming proceedings.

“This session of the Wizengamot will come to order,” the Chief Warlock, Albus Dumbledore intoned.

Dumbledore was seated in the largest, grandest gilded chair in the room. Amelia, as was her right as both the Head of the DMLE and the Chief Prosecutor, sat to his immediate right. On his other side, green bowler hat placed precisely in the centre of his own desk, sat the portly figure of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge.

“We are here today for the trial of one Peter Oliver Pettigrew,” Dumbledore continued. “Aurors, bring in the accused!”

Amelia watched as a short, pudgy, balding man was led through the far door by three maroon robed men. Two of her aurors kept their wands trained on Pettigrew as they led him across the stone floor. At the last second, Pettigrew seemed to baulk and, with a massive shake of his head, tried to back away from the wooden chair. It seemed to sense his reluctance for the chains that adorned its sides and legs rattled ominously.

A pair of hands, one from each auror, shoved the small man in the shoulder blades. Pettigrew squawked as he stumbled forward before being jerked backwards into the chair. Immediately, the chains slithered around both arms, across his chest and wrapped around his legs.

Meanwhile, the third auror had magically sealed the door that they’d entered through before conjuring a two foot high circular wall around the accused chair. Amelia nodded in approval as she inspected the wall. It was perfectly slick and topped with multitudes of razor-sharp metal points.

Shifting her eyes to Pettigrew, Amelia studied him closely. Sweat dripped off of the sides of his face, just like it did every time that she’d questioned him over the past two weeks. He was swallowing hard and continuously. His beady eyes flickered around the room before widening as they came to rest on one particular spot. Seeing him begin to shiver in fright, even more than usual, Amelia turned in her seat.

It only took her a few minutes before she saw what had captured Pettigrew’s attention. A thin man with ginger hair starting to go grey sat in the highest tier. His intent eyes were fixated on Pettigrew.
He wore old, threadbare brown robes. Her eyes flicked to the bare seats to either side of him and she made a mental note to find out his identity later.

“Peter Oliver Pettigrew, you stand accused of betraying the location of and indirectly causing the deaths of James Charlus Potter and Lily Evans Potter, of passing sensitive information to the dark wizard known as Lord Voldemort, of being a member of Lord Voldemort’s Death Eaters, of the deliberate murder of twelve muggles and of being an unregistered animagus,” Chief Warlock Dumbledore stated.

A jumble of voices, both mumbles and shouts, broke out around the chamber causing Dumbledore to resort to banging his gavel before he could continue.

“How do you plead?”

Pettigrew’s eyes darted about the courtroom, his tongue licking his lips, before finally, he stuttered an answer.

“G…g…guil…guilty.”

The outcry this time, not only from the Wizengamot itself, but also from the higher galleries, was almost deafening. Shouts of outrage, cries of vengeance, bellows of retribution and abuse were hurtled at the small man. Flashes of light erupted from the journalists sending great spouts of purple smoke billowing high into the domed chamber.

Dumbledore’s gavel this time wasn’t enough to calm the outrage. In the end, the Chief Warlock was forced to stand, raise his wand and let loose a deafening cannon blast before quiet returned.

“Your guilty plea has been noted, Mister Pettigrew,” Dumbledore intoned. “Before we consider sentencing, I believe that it would be best to hear what led you to these actions. Madam Bones?”

With a nod, Amelia rose from her chair.

“Chief Warlock, Minister, fellow members of the Wizengamot, guests,” she began, nodding to each individual or group before turning her attention to the man in the chain-wrapped chair.

“Mister Pettigrew, before we begin, I’d like to remind you that you and I have had numerous interviews, conducted with the use of veritaserum. This means that I know the answers to the questions that I am going to ask. Will you answer truthfully now, or do we need to dose you with veritaserum once more?”

Pettigrew’s head dropped as he shook it resignedly back and forth.

“Very well. We will begin with your involvement with the dark wizard, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Are you one of his Death Eaters?”

“Y…yes,” his voice was barely audible, so, with a nod, Amelia had one of her aurors cast a sonorous on the man.

“When did you become a Death Eater?”

“Thirty-first of May, nineteen eighty-one.”

“Why did you become a Death Eater?”

Amelia noticed Pettigrew’s eyes flick up to the man in the top tier before answering. “I … I was
approached by … by some Death Eaters to … to become a spy for … for the Dark Lord. If I didn’t agree … if I didn’t agree, they were going to kill me.”

“Did you knowingly pass information to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named how to find James and Lily Potter who were in hiding under the _fidelius_ charm?”

“Y…yes,” he replied in a voice so low that if it wasn’t for the _sonorous_, Amelia was certain that not even the two aurors standing right behind him would have been able to hear him.

A rumble of voices erupted around the courtroom at this announcement, only to be silenced moments later by the Chief Warlock’s gavel.

“Please explain how you were able to give He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named this knowledge.”

“L…Lily and … and James and … and Sirius …”

“This would be Sirius Black?”

Pettigrew nodded his head. “They decided to try to trick the Dark Lord by making me Secret Keeper instead of Sirius like everyone expected.”

“For the record,” Amelia’s voice rose over the crowd, “you were the Secret Keeper for Lily and James Potter and _not_ Sirius Black?”

“Yes.”

At her signal, the auror closest to the door stepped forward, a long thin glass case held out before him. A single wand lay inside it.

“This wand, identified as being thirteen and a half inches long, yew, with phoenix feather core was found in your possession. Is this your wand?”

Pettigrew flinched away from the wand, a look of utmost terror on his face. “N…no.”

“Whose wand is it?”

“Th…the D…dar…dark L…lords.”

The crowd’s eruption lasted through the gavel and half a dozen of Dumbledore’s cannon bursts before Amelia was able to continue.

“How did it come to be in your possession?”

“I … I found it after … after what happened that …that night and took it to keep it … keep it safe until he ... until he returns,” Pettigrew replied.

“Please tell us about your last encounter with Sirius Black.”

“Sirius came after me. He knew what I’d done. He knew that I’d betrayed them,” Pettigrew’s head had dropped, the picture of complete defeat as he intoned the story. “When he caught up to me, I knew that he was going to kill me. So, I did the only thing that I could think of. I shouted out that Sirius had betrayed Lily and James and, before he could do anything, I sent a blasting hex at the
street behind me. In the confusion, I cut off my finger, transformed and escaped.”

“Please tell us what your animagus form is.”

“A … a rat.”

“You got that right!” a vicious snarl erupted from the top of the chamber.

“How did you become an animagus?” Amelia asked.

“James, Sirius and Remus helped me at Hogwarts. We could all transform,” he stated.

“James Potter, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin could become animagus as well?”

Pettigrew nodded. “James was a stag. Sirius, a big black dog. Remus … Remus wasn’t an animagus.”

“Very well. Where have you been in the last eleven years since you faked your death?”

“I found a wizarding family and have been hiding out as their pet rat.”

Amelia turned to face both the Minister for Magic and the Chief Warlock. “Gentlemen, that concludes the questions that I had originally had for Mister Pettigrew. I believe that his answers verify his guilt. If I may, though, I have one or two additional questions that I’d like to ask.”

The two wizards shared a brief look before Dumbledore waved one hand towards her. “You may proceed, Madam Bones.”

Turning back, Amelia took a deep breath. What she was about to do would either be one of her greatest accomplishments or one of her greatest mistakes.

“Mister Pettigrew. I have seen that you have the Dark Mark on your left arm. Is it possible to be branded with the Dark Mark unwillingly?”

Pettigrew recoiled from her question, his eyes darted around the chamber, seemingly pausing in a number of different places.

“N…no.”

Once again the room erupted but Amelia ignored it, pushing forward with her next, most vital question.

“Do you know the names of any other Death Eaters?”

A nod was her only response.

“Please name them.”

“L…lucius M…malfoy, S…sev…severus Sn…snape, Gregory G…Goyle , …”

“Chief Warlock, Minister, I must protest! The man is obviously lying! These accusations were refuted years ago!”

Amelia turned to see exactly what she expected to see. Lucius Malfoy, his long white hair flying around his shoulders, cane grasped in one hand, was leaning intently down from his seat. Around him, people stared and backed away, doubt clear in their eyes.
“Yes, yes, I am aware of that, Lucius,” Fudge replied.

“Severus Snape is innocent. I have already given evidence to this fact,” Dumbledore intoned. “No. These last questions and remarks will be ignored. Madam Bones. If you do not have any more questions which pertain to the charges at hand, then we will proceed to the sentencing.”

With a stiff nod, Amelia retook her seat. She’d hoped, oh how she’d hoped, but in the end, she knew what the outcome was going to be. Without getting her hands on Malfoy and his ilk and dosing them with veritaserum, a procedure that had been denied the DMLE at the end of the war due to what she believed to be some very obviously greased palmed, then her hands were tied.

“Members of the Wizengamot,” Dumbledore continued, “you have heard Mister Pettigrew’s confession and declaration of guilt. This negates the need for a vote on his innocence or guilt. We will move straight on to sentencing. For the level of charges, there are three options for sentencing.” With a flick of his wand, a transparent sphere was conjured above Pettigrew’s head for each option as it was outlined. “Twenty years imprisonment in Azkaban. Life imprisonment in Azkaban. Kiss by Dementors. Please cast your vote now.”

Around her, the witches and wizards of the Wizengamot raised their wands and shot a jet of magic into the sphere of their choosing. With each jet that hit, the floating spheres turned a slightly deeper shade of red. By the time that the last vote had been cast, it was easy to see the decided upon sentence.

“Peter Oliver Pettigrew. By your own admission, you are declared guilty of all charges. You are hereby sentenced to life imprisonment on Azkaban Island. Aurors, take him away.”

As the three aurors stepped forward, Amelia rose from her seat.

“Chief Warlock, Minister, fellow members of the Wizengamot,” she declared in a loud voice to gain their attention. “The testimony that we’ve heard today has indicated that a great injustice has been carried out upon one of our own. Sirius Black, who, if he was with us today, would be the Head of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black, was sentenced to Azkaban Prison without a trial for crimes that he did not commit. He has been there for nearly eleven years. I move that we bring him before us at the first possible opportunity.”

“I second that motion,” the regal voice of Augusta Longbottom stated from where she stood. For the briefest of instances, Amelia could have sworn that a look of utter contempt and anger passed across the face of the Chief Warlock, but the presence of his beard made it hard to tell.

“All those in favour?” Dumbledore asked. Around the room, nearly every wand of the Wizengamot was lit and raised.

“Motion passed,” Dumbledore declared. “At the earliest convenience, Sirius Black is to be brought before his august gathering.”

“Actually, Chief Warlock,” Amelia said quickly seeing his hand moving towards his gavel, “Sirius Black is currently in one of my holding cells in the Ministry. I can have him here in less than ten minutes.”

“In that case, we will recess for ten minutes,” Dumbledore declared with a sharp rap of his gavel.

Just as she’d predicted, less than ten minutes later, a filthy, emaciated man shuffled into the courtroom. His long black hair and beard were still matted with dirt, blood and who knew what else
from his time in Azkaban. His greying tatters of clothes hung limply on his body.

With a prod from one of his guards, he was directed to sit in the chair in the centre of the room. Surprise etched his face when the chains rattled but refused to bind him in place.

“Sirius Black, you have been brought before the Wizengamot in relation to events surrounding the death of Lily and James Potter on the thirty-first of October, nineteen eighty-one and the death of Peter Pettigrew and twelve muggles on the first of November nineteen eighty-one,” Dumbledore began.

“I didn’t do it! I’m innocent!” Sirius rasped.

“Evidence has recently come to light to support your innocence, Mister Black. In fact, we have just finished a trial where the real culprit, Peter Pettigrew, confessed to all charges and was sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban Prison,” Dumbledore continued.

“Then … then, I’m free?” Sirius asked wide-eyed.

“Indeed you are.”

“Just a moment, Chief Warlock,” Fudge interrupted. “During Pettigrew’s trial, he stated that Black here was an unregistered animagus.”

“Indeed he did. Mister Black?” Dumbledore asked.

“Yeah, yeah I’m an animagus,” he replied nervously.

“The fine for being an unregistered animagus is set at one thousand galleons. In addition, you have forty-eight hours to register with the appropriate department,” Dumbledore declared.

“If I may, Chief Warlock?”

Amelia looked across to see Madam Longbottom standing, waiting to be acknowledged. At the Chief Warlock’s gesture, she continued.

“Mister Black was arrested and sent to Azkaban Prison without trial and has been remanded there for nearly eleven years. This is a travesty and should never have happened. To think that anyone could have suffered such at the hands of the Ministry of Magic is outrageous. And then to find that he is simply given a fine for a minor infraction. No apology. No compensation. I believe that we can do better than that. In fact, I insist that we do better than that!”

Murmurs of agreement swept the chamber.

“You are, of course, correct, Madam,” the Chief Warlock stated simply. “Mister Black. On behalf of the Wizengamot and the Ministry of Magic, we offer you our sincerest apologies for what you have been forced to suffer.”

Amelia noted with a raised eyebrow that Sirius Black seemed remarkably unimpressed by the offered sentiments. She would, too, if she’d been in his place.

“And the recompenses?” Madam Longbottom asked.

At this, the Minister of Magic slowly rose from his seat. “Mister Black. As compensation for your time spent in Azkaban, you will be given fifty thousand galleons.”

An angry murmur swept through the chamber, a sentiment that Amelia also shared. Fifty thousand
galleons for nearly eleven years? There was no way that that seemed fair in the slightest.

Obviously understanding the feeling in the chamber, Fudge quickly continued. “Fifty thousand galleons for each year spent in Azkaban.”

Amelia gave a stiff nod. It still in no way made up for the lost years, but it was better.

“Now that that matter has been finalised, I declare this session of the Wizengamot closed,” Dumbledore stated with a final rap of his gavel.

Immediately, Amelia moved down to the centre floor.

“Sirius,” she began, only to be cut off by the man himself.

“Amelia, thank you, thank you so much for what you’ve done,” he said, tears pooling in his eyes and beginning to slide down his cheeks to meet his jubilant smile.
Across the Great Hall, the buzz of hundreds of voices was intermingled with the sound of cutlery as well as the occasional laugh. Lifting her head from her paper, Minerva McGonagall swept her gaze across the four House tables. As was her habit, she spent longer watching her own cubs, especially her favourites, not to mention the Weasley twins who seemed to demand twice the amount of watching as any regular student.

Seeing nothing amiss, she snapped her paper taught once more before picking up a finger of toast to dunk into the perfectly done boiled egg.

“Minerva,” the clear tones of the Headmaster beside her interrupted, “may I suggest that you turn to page twenty-four?”

Puzzled, she first turned her head to regard her friend. For once, the twinkle that seemed to be ever present in the corner of his eye was missing. And, somewhere under that long, long beard, his mouth was set in a straight line. Something, she knew, was bothering him.

Quickly, she turned her *Daily Prophet* to the indicated page.

“Two thirds of the way done, middle column,” Dumbledore stated.

Scanning down, she found what had caught the Headmaster’s notice. Two advertisements. Both looking for tutors, one in Defence Against the Dark Arts, the other for something called Magical Cultures of the World. And both sought by the same person – Harry Potter.

Ignoring the soft swear from her other side where it seemed Severus had also now seen the wanted ads, Minerva read through the ads. And then a second time. The one for Defence was fairly straight forward and, if any of the rumours that she’d heard in relation to Lockhart’s lessons were accurate, fully justified. The Magical Cultures of the World tutor intrigued her, though. Once, a long time ago, Hogwarts offered an elective similar to this, however limited to the magical culture of Great Britain.

“If you could kindly deal with this, Minerva?” Albus asked in an off-hand voice.

“In what way, Albus?” she replied. “You know as well as I do that students are allowed to hire their own tutors. Just because no one has in the last three generations or so, doesn’t mean that they can’t.”

“So, what, the Golden Boy simply gets his own way again?” Severus drawled from her other side.

“It may be allowed, but I think that this is not a good use for Mister Potter’s time or money. Not to mention the attention that he’d attract to himself. You know how he feels about being talked about and stared at. Perhaps if you gently reminded him of these facts …” Dumbledore trailed off, his point more than made.

“I’ll speak to Mister Potter,” Minerva allowed. “But I won’t be dissuading him from this course if this is what he feels he needs for his education.”

The sudden clatter and near inaudible mutterings from the potions master beside her snapped her narrowed eyes around. With a jerk, Snape pushed his chair back, stood and strode from the room, his cloak billowing behind him.

*I wonder why Mister Potter didn’t advertise for a potions tutor. Maybe I should suggest it,* she thought after him.
“You wanted to see me, Professor?”

Looking up from her desk, Minerva saw the small boy hovering in the door. As always, she had half a mind to take a comb to his messy hair. But then, she’d had the same impulse every time that she’d seen his father.


She watched narrowed-eyed as he carefully crossed the room and took a seat in front of her desk, all without looking even remotely in her direction.

“Would you like a biscuit, Mister Potter?” she asked, offering the tin that she kept on the side of her desk to him.

A small shake of the head and a muttered “no thanks” was his only reply.

“Now, Mister Potter, I’m sure that you’re wondering why I asked you here?” she began and, after seeing his nod, continued. “It was noticed by the staff this morning that you had placed two advertisements in The Daily Prophet for tutors, one for Defence Against the Dark Arts and one for a subject called Magical Cultures of the World.”

“Yes, ma’am?” he asked in a small voice, his eyes still remaining averted from her.

“Firstly, while it is not against the rules for students to have private tutors, it is a practise that fell out of favour many years ago. I trust you understand that Hogwarts cannot pay for private tutors?”

“Yes, Professor. I’ve got enough money to pay them myself,” Harry replied.

“Good, good. Now, I was wondering why you felt you needed a private tutor for Defence Against the Dark Arts?”

For the first time, Harry’s head snapped up. “Haven’t you heard about Lockhart’s classes?”

“Professor Lockhart,” Harry repeated, “can’t teach for nuts. His first lesson consisted of a questionnaire about himself, followed by him letting a colony of Cornish Pixies loose on us. Every lesson since then he’s simply been reading out of one of his books. And making us act out the interesting bits. There’s no way that we’ll learn anything from him. And especially after Quirrell last year…”

Minerva frowned across the table. The boy made a good point and she was pleased to see that he was doing something about it. Not many of her students took their education seriously.

“Might I ask what you had in mind for these tutorials?” she asked.

Harry looked back down as he rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m hoping for a couple of evenings a week for Defence, maybe Tuesdays and Thursdays since we have Astronomy on Wednesdays. And then Sunday mornings for Magical Cultures.”

“Very well,” Minerva nodded. “I assume that you won’t be going to Professor Lockhart’s classes?” At his snort, one which she graciously ignored, she continued. “In that case, I expect you to use your normal Defence periods for extra study, Mister Potter. No loafing around, understand?”
“Yes, Professor.”

“Also, as soon as you have determined who your tutors are, I would like you to tell me and at some point in the near future, I would also like to meet them,” she instructed.

“Yes, Professor,” he repeated and then, after a quick flick up and down of his head, “um, I was thinking of inviting some of my friends to join me. Would that be alright?”

Minerva sat back, thinking. After a minute she came to her decision.

“Hogwarts rules state that students are allowed to contract their own tutors. If you would like to invite any of your friends to join you, then you may, assuming that the tutors themselves don’t mind the extra students. However, I would expect any student that takes up your generous offer to talk to both their guardians and their Head of House first.”

“Yes, Professor. Thank you.”

At her nod, which she had no idea how he saw considering he still was refusing to look at her, he bolted for the door. Minerva contemplated the door most carefully for the next while, her mind replaying the conversation over and over. Something had changed in Mister Potter and whatever it was, she didn’t like it. One of her cubs refusing to even look at her set off far too many warning bells in her opinion.

-oOoOo-

“What’s that, Harry?” Kevin Entswhistle asked.

“A Goblin Postal Service box,” Harry replied, looking across the table in the library that their normal study group were sitting around.

“I’ve heard of those,” Lil Moon commented, peering interestedly at the box. “Never seen one, though.”

“Aren’t they supposed to have lots of different security charms on them?” Susan Bones asked.

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “It’ll remove tracking charms and portkeys charms and most mild hexes or jinxes on letters. Anything really dangerous gets redirected back to the goblins.”

“I wouldn’t want to be someone who sent a dangerous letter to goblins,” Hannah Abbot shivered.

“Why’s that carving of the owl on top of it flashing?” Terry Boot asked.

“That shows that there’s a letter inside,” Harry replied, lifting the lid.

Inside were not one or even two, but dozens of letters. Reaching in, he pulled out a stack, only to see the empty space immediately refill with additional letters.

“Who’s sending you lots of letters?” Su Li asked.

“Ooh, I bet they’re applicants for the tutoring positions you advertised,” Hermione near squealed, earning a reprimanding look from Madam Pince.

“Do you guys want to help me sort through them?” Harry asked.

“What’s in it for us?” Terry asked.
“Well, Professor McGonagall did say that I could invite my friends to join me in the tutoring sessions as long as they talked to their parents and Head of House first,” Harry offered.

“You mean no more Lockhart?” Neville squeaked.

“We’re in!” Terry, Kevin and Wayne Hopkirk declared.

“Hmph, there’s nothing wrong with Professor Lockhart,” Hermione declared, quickly followed by notes of agreement from the rest of the girls around the table.

“If that’s how you feel, then we boys will look over the DADA applicants and you girls can look over the Magical Cultures applicants,” Harry decided.

A dozen or so hands reached in, snatched up a letter, tore it open and started building two piles.

“That’s a lot of letters,” Neville whistled.

“Probably because it’s Harry. Everyone wants to be known as the person who tutored The-Boy-Who-Lived,” Susan commented.

“I like the sound of this one,” Hermione declared some time later. “Mister Daniel Cruise. He’s been studying the cultures of Europe for the past twenty-five years. He’s even written four books comparing Britain with different cultures.”

“But Hermione, he says here that he’s mostly interested in the ‘academic pursuit of comparing and contrasting European cultures’,” Hannah pointed out. “That doesn’t really sound as though he’s travelled to those countries. And Harry wanted to learn about cultures all around the world, not just Europe.”

“This one sounds completely different,” Susan piped up. “He’s been travelling the world for the past three years. He’s visited magical communities in Africa, North America, South America, Asia and Europe. And he’s Australian, so that’s the last continent. Oh,” she continued after a minute, “maybe he’s not so good. He doesn’t actually have any qualifications.”

“But he’s actually been to those places?” Harry asked.

“That’s what he says,” Susan confirmed.

“Write his name down, Susan. Someone who’s actually been there deserves to go on the short list,” Harry told her.

“So, Harry, who are you going to invite to these tutoring sessions?” Terry asked. “Just us, or do you have some others in mind?”

“Well,” Harry replied, dropping the letter that he’d just finished with onto the table, “all of you, of course. The rest of Gryffindor …”

“I doubt Ron’d be allowed,” Hermione commented. “He’s still got a month’s worth of detentions for flying that ridiculous car into the whomping willow. Madam Sprout and Hagrid’s replacement, Mister Elmsworthy, were still trying to put its branches into slings this morning.”

“Not to mention how atrocious Ron’d be at the DADA spells. Have you seen him trying to do magic with that broken wand of his of late?” Wayne commented.

“What about the rest of our Houses, Harry?” Su Li asked.
“Maybe. If they want in, they can ask,” Harry shrugged.

“But no Slytherins, right?” Wayne asked.

Harry made sure to word his answer carefully. “Definitely not Malfoy or his cronies.”

“Harry!” Neville breathed. “I’ve found your Defence tutor!”

After receiving curious glances, he continued. “He’s got a Mastery in Defence Against the Dark Arts, a Mastery in Dark Creatures, and his references include Professor McGonagall, Sirius Black, James Potter and Lily Potter.”

“Neville, Harry’s parents are, well, you know,” Hermione stumbled on her comment.

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense, Neville, who is it?” Harry asked.

“Remus Lupin.”

-oOoOo-

“Miss Granger, could you stay back a moment, please?” Minerva called as her second year Tranfiguration class came to a close.

She watched from the corner of her eye as Hermione shooed both Mister Potter and Mister Longbottom on, telling them that she’d meet them in the Great Hall shortly.

“Thank you, Miss Granger, I won’t keep you long,” Minerva told the anxious-looking young girl in front of her. “I have found myself with a slight mystery on my hands that I’m hoping that you can help me with.”

Hermione beamed with pleasure. “Of course, Professor.”

“It’s about Mister Potter,” Minerva revealed. “Since the start of term, I’ve noticed that he’s been more reserved not only in class but also when we have met at other times. He no longer volunteers to answer questions and indeed, he rarely even looks me in the eye.”

The longer that she talked, the further the young girl’s face in front of her fell. If Minerva had to judge, she’d say that Miss Granger knew precisely why it was that Mister Potter was acting the way he was. Her eyes shifted backwards and forwards, even as she began chewing on her bottom lip.

“I’m … I’m not sure it’s my place to tell, Professor,” Hermione finally stated, her voice catching.

“If Mister Potter is having trouble, then I’d like to help,” she told the girl before her. “I believe that I’ve shown in the past that I can be trusted to have Mister Potter’s best interest in mind.”

Instantly, she knew that she’d said the wrong thing. Hermione began shuffling her feet, glancing back at the door behind her and chewing on her lip so much that Minerva worried that there shortly wouldn’t be any lip left.

“Miss Granger? I give you my word that anything that is said here will be held in the strictest of confidences,” she prompted after a minute of silence.

“He doesn’t trust you any more,” she suddenly blurted and instantly looked like she wanted to bolt away.

Minerva was glad that she was sitting down. Mister Potter didn’t trust her? James and Lily’s boy
didn’t trust her? That was … that was inconceivable. She stared at the girl in front of her.

“May I ask why not?” Minerva asked once her heart restarted.

It seemed that now that she’d started, Hermione was willing to continue. “Do … do you remember last year when I brought Harry to you and he told you about his … his home life?”

Indeed she did. Just the thought of what little Harry had told her had caused her to have more than a dram or two of the hard stuff afterwards.

“Yes, Miss Granger. I remember.”

“Do … do you remember what you promised Harry?” Hermione asked, before once again beginning to chew on her bottom lip.

“Oh course. I promised him that I’d talk to Professor Dumbledore about ensuring that his home life improved,” Minerva replied.

Hermione nodded. “Yes. But you see. That didn’t happen.”

Minerva’s eyes narrowed. “Miss Granger. Kindly tell me what you know of Mister Potter’s summer.”

“He … he ended up getting locked in his room. His relatives,” she spat the word, “took away all of his things, put bars on his window, locks on the door and installed a cat-flap to push some food through to him.”

One hand clutched at her chest even as Minerva gasped in horror. Hermione, though, simply continued.

“He ended up running away one night when his relatives were away. He came to my house,” this statement caused her to beam, “but unfortunately, we were going away so he couldn’t stay with us. He ended up at Diagon Alley, living in an apartment above a shop that he owns.”

“By himself?” Minerva asked.

“No,” Hermione shook her head. “No, he stayed with the nice family that runs his shop, *Hermione’s Book Nook*.”

“At least it seems that his summer improved,” Minerva commented, trying to find a positive while mentally noting the name of the shop.

“I guess, although he *did* end up at a hearing about underage magic, although the first time wasn’t his fault, it was a house elf and the second time was when he accidentally made that vow while he was at my place.”

Ignoring the non-sense that was the ‘house-elf’ comment, Minerva focussed on the potentially more important vow.

“What was this vow that Mister Potter made?” she asked.

“Well, he was upset at the time,” Hermione replied, “but I think that it was something like that he’d rather give up his magic rather than spend another night at Privet Drive with the Dursleys.”

“Thank you, Miss Granger, that’s good to know,” Minerva replied, her mind racing with the implications of such a vow. “And I assume that since Mister Potter’s home life didn’t improve, he
blames both myself and Headmaster Dumbledore?”

At Hermione’s nod, she once again thanked her before sending her off to dinner.

But the dinner hour came and went and still Minerva stayed rooted to the spot. Her mind raced with everything that she’d just heard. She’d had half a mind to go straight to Dumbledore’s office and give him a piece of her mind. But then her rational mind caught up. Obviously the last time that she’d done that, he hadn’t listened. He’d placated her with empty words before simply continuing to do what he thought was best.

Slowly, she got to her feet to make her way back to her quarters. This, she knew, was going to be a long night. A night of soul-searching and deciding the best course to take. Her faith in Dumbledore had just taken a massive hit and, combined with the loss of trust from James and Lily’s boy …

All she knew was that things simply couldn’t continue the way that they had been.
Chapter 17

With Neville at her side and Ron trailing along behind, Hermione followed Harry into the disused classroom that Professor McGonagall had set aside for their use for meeting Harry’s prospective tutors that morning.

Well, really, the only prospective position was for Magical Cultures of the World. Harry had already decided upon Remus Lupin, not that she could blame him. Mister Lupin had impressive credentials, not to mention his connection to Harry’s parents that she knew her best friend wouldn’t be able to pass up.

No, it was the Magical Cultures tutor that she was most concerned about. The subject itself fascinated her. Simply the idea of learning about worldwide magical communities, perhaps even a little of their magic had her almost bouncing with joy. The problem, though, was in Harry’s first choice for tutor. He’d decided to go with the man who’d been travelling for the past three years instead of studying. Her own preferences had been overruled, not only by Harry, but also by everyone in their study group.

Walking into the room, her eyes first landed on Professor McGonagall. She stood just off to one side and, if the extreme thinness of her lips was any indication, she was no more impressed with the young man standing beside her than Hermione herself expected to be.

“G’day, you must be Mister Potter,” the man said, striding forward, hand outstretched, “I’m Michael Dungaree, but everyone calls me Mick.”

As Harry shook the man’s hand, Hermione was given a chance to take him in. His round face showed a happy countenance; indeed the laugh lines radiating from his brown eyes highlighted that. His hair, a dark brown, almost black in colour, was shoulder-length and incredibly messy, somewhat like Harry’s own.

Instead of ordinary wizard’s robes, he wore something much more muggle-like in appearance. His dark tan coat that reached to his ankles looked to be made of some kind of leather. At the moment it was open, its thick belt dangling from the coat’s loops. Under the coat, Hermione noticed a red flannel shirt, black jeans and what looked to be dragon-hide boots. Abandoned on a desk behind him, she noted an odd looking broad-brimmed hat.

“These are my friends,” Harry was saying. “I hope that you don’t mind them coming along today. This is Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom and Ron Weasley.”

“G’day,” Mick greeted, nodding at each of them before moving to shake each of their hands. “Hermione. Nev. And Blue.”

Blue? she noticed Ron mouthing.

“Oh, yeah, probably should explain that one, eh?” Mick continued, obviously seeing the confused looked on everyone’s faces. “In Australia, anyone with red hair is called ‘Blue’. Come to think of it, that’s what we call red cattle dogs as well.”

Hermione stared. This young man, who she guessed couldn’t be more than twenty-one or twenty-two, simply didn’t exude the personality of a teacher. As Harry started to question him, she very carefully bit her lip to stop herself from saying something that she was sure that she’d later regret.

“Yeah, soon as I got out of school I took off,” Mick was saying. “Travel the world, you know.
Wanted to see it all. Started out with a couple of mates, but Steve left after Kathmandu and Craig after Macau, met up with Cindy and Davo in Machu Picchu and we travelled South America together before they took off back Down Under, so it’s just been me for the last fifteen months or so.”

“How many of you were travelling the world?” Ron wondered.

Mick grinned and pointed one hand like a gun at the red head. “What’s the number one export for Australia? Magical or muggle, doesn’t matter, they’re both the same.”

Ron looked as confused as the other two boys as Hermione’s mind raced. Unfortunately, she didn’t know that many facts about the far away land. Wool, opals, wheat, cattle and iron ore were all possibilities. Before she could come to any conclusions, Mick answered his own question.

“Back packers,” he laughed. “You go to any country in the world and you’ll find at least one Aussie there travelling around having a gawk at the world.”

“How much time did you spend in each country?” Harry asked.

Hermione stared. Back packers? Was this guy for real?

“Depended,” Mick shrugged. “Sometimes a few days, other times a month or two. Spent most of my time in their magical parts, of course, but I also made sure to see all of the muggle sights, too.”

“So, you do know a lot about each country?” Neville asked timidly.

“We-ll, don’t know if I’d say a lot,” Mick mused. “But I know a bit. More about some countries than others. Course, I kept a diary of everything I saw and did each day, otherwise I’d never remember what went with where.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up at the sight of the thick, old, battered book that Mick pulled out from one of the pockets of his coat.

“If you travel around so much, will tutoring Mister Potter be convenient for you?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“Reckon so, depends a lot on what Harry here’s got in mind. Thought I’d base myself somewhere and spend a year exploring Europe. Everything’s so close here; it’d be easy to jump about and back again.”

“I was hoping for tutoring for a couple of hours on a Sunday morning, maybe from nine until eleven?” Harry explained.

Ron’s groan about the potential loss of his precious sleeping and eating time was ignored in favour of Mick’s reply.

“Sounds perfect to me. I can explore the continent during the week and spend the week-end in the UK,” Mick beamed.

“What about other magical beings? Do you know much about them?” Harry asked.

“What? House-elfs and goblins and what-not like you mentioned in your ad?” Mick asked. “Can’t say that I do. At least, not more than most magicals already know. But I’m willing to learn at the same time as the rest of ya. Mind you, the best way to learn is straight from the horse’s mouth, you know. So, I reckon that I’d aim to get one of those magical beings in to help with the tutoring those
“days. Which reminds me, do you lot have any mates here from places outside the UK?”

“Pavarti and Padma are from India and Su Li’s family live in Hong Kong,” Hermione supplied.

“And isn’t Blaise from Italy?” Harry wondered.

“Zabini? What do ya want with that dirty snake?” Ron spat.

“Mister Weasly! That is no way to talk about a fellow student. And for your information, Slytherin House has produced many fine, upstanding members in its long history,” Professor McGonagall reprimanded.

“Well, bring ‘em along,” Mick beamed. “I’ve been to all them countries, but I reckon you’d learn more from them than from me.”

“So you wouldn’t have any problem tutoring more than just me then?” Harry asked.

“Nah, the more the merrier, I say,” Mick winked.

Hermione could see that, unfortunately, Harry’s mind was already made up. Once more she scrutinised Mick Dungaree. He was like no teacher that she’d ever encountered before. He was laid back, had a terrible accent that was hard to understand at times, used appalling grammar and seemed too eager to bounce from one idea to another at the drop of a hat. On the other hand, she couldn’t deny that he seemed to know his topic and was willing to utilise experts to supplement any deficiency in knowledge that he had. With a sigh, she decided that Harry could do worse.

“Well, Mick, I think that we’ll get along brilliantly,” Harry declared, stepping forward to once more shake the man’s hand. “When can you start?”

“Tomorrow’s good for me. That work for you?” Mick replied.

Harry’s grin indicated a done deal.

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“Mister Potter, a quick word, if you please,” Professor McGonagall asked after ushering Mick Dungaree out of the room.

“Yes, Professor,” Harry replied, once again failing to meet her eye.

“I know that you are due to meet Mister Lupin shortly, so I won’t keep you,” Professor McGonagall stated. “I would like for you to come to my office after dinner this evening. There are a few matters that I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry agreed, wondering not only what it could be about, but also if there was a way to get out of going.

“Very well,” she nodded. “As I already know Mister Lupin, I do not believe that my presence will be required. I’ll send him to you the instant that he arrives.”

Some five or so minutes later, the door to the old classroom opened once more. This was something that Harry’d been looking forward to. Sure, he’d been writing to Remus Lupin for a few months now, but they’d never had the chance to actually meet in person.

The person who came through the door looked too old to have gone to school with his parents. His light brown hair was flecked with more than a few grey hairs and his face was lined and haggard
looking. His clothes, an old brown travelling cloak over a threadbare suit and cardigan, looked almost as good as Harry’s own Dudley-hand-me-downs. His sharp blue eyes roamed the room, taking everything in in seconds before fixing in on Harry himself.

“Harry,” he breathed. “It’s so good to finally see you again after all these years.”

Harry felt himself smile at his father’s friend. “Hello, Remus.”

“You look so like your father, Harry. Except for your eyes. There’s no mistaking Lily there,” Remus sighed.

Noticing Lupin’s eyes drifting to either side, Harry introduced his friends.

“This is Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom and Ron Weasley.”

“It’s very nice to meet you all,” Lupin nodded to each of them. “Mister Longbottom, Mister Weasley, I knew both of your parents a long time ago. Miss Granger, I must admit that I feel as though I already know you after all I’ve heard about you from Harry’s letters. It’s good to be able to put a face to the name at last.”

Noticing Hermione’s glance in his direction, Harry knew that he’d be questioned later about exactly what he’d been saying about her.

“Now, Mister Potter, I understand that you are looking for a tutor for Defence Against the Dark Arts?” Lupin asked, placing his old briefcase on a nearby table.

It took Harry a moment to understand why Remus had switched to such a formal mode of address, but then it clicked – this was supposed to be a job interview.

“Yes, Mister Lupin. We read your application with great delight. You came with the highest of references,” Harry stated.

A small upturn at the corner of Lupin’s mouth let Harry know Remus had caught his implication about his parents.

“And your qualifications were amazing,” Hermione contributed.

Lupin bowed his head in thanks. “Your advertisement mentioned tutoring in both first and second year Defence Against the Dark Arts?”

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “I don’t think anyone really learnt anything from Quirrell last year. Except for Hermione, of course. And the couple of lessons that we’ve had this year have been a complete joke.”

From the corner of his eye, Harry noticed Hermione blanche at the insult to her new favourite teacher.

“Who is your DADA professor this year?” Lupin frowned.

“Gilderoy Lockhart,” Harry spat.

Harry noticed the thoughtful expression on Lupin’s face, but not a word was said about Lupin’s opinion of the man.

“Would I be correct in thinking that you’d like these tutoring sessions to replace your regular Defence lessons?” Lupin asked.
Harry nodded. “I was hoping that you could come a couple of nights a week, maybe Tuesdays and Thursdays after dinner. Would seven pm until eight-thirty work for you?”

After looking at the ceiling for a few seconds, Lupin gave a nod. “I think that that could be made to work.”

A hand stopped Harry from his next question. “Before we go any further,” Lupin said, “I’d like to warn you that I have a … condition that means that I occasionally become ill. That may mean that I won’t be able to come at some times. I’d be willing to make up those sessions at other times that suit us both.”

“That’s fine,” Harry replied, trying to suppress his worry over Remus’ illness. “Would it be alright if some others came, too?”

“How many others?” Lupin asked with narrowed eyes.

“I’m not sure,” Harry replied. “There’s a few guys that have told me that they’re interested in being tutored rather than have to put up with Lockhart. Including Neville here.”

“Very well, Harry. You’re the one paying for these sessions. However, I’ll have to lay down some ground rules. No more than twenty and, considering that this is actually going to be a replacement class, then I will be assigning homework that I expect completed.”

“Deal,” Harry grinned.

“Excellent,” Lupin smiled. “If that’s all the formal parts settled? Good. In that case, Harry, I was asked to pass this on to you.”

With a look of confusion for his new Defence Against the Dark Arts tutor, Harry took the offered envelope.

-oOoOo-

With dinner not too far away and the weather being particularly fine, Harry opted to wander out onto the grounds, the letter clutched in his hands. Hermione and Neville had given obvious excuses to allow him some time alone to read the letter, however, he was positive that nothing would stop Hermione from questioning him later, if only to ‘make sure that the was alright’ as opposed to satisfying her own curiosity.

Finding himself under a beech tree overlooking the Black Lake, Harry sank to the ground. He wiggled into a comfortable position, his back against the tree and broke the seal of the letter.

A cursory glance told him that the writer’s penmanship was nearly as bad as his own, whether that was usual for him or a by-product of his time in Azkaban was anyone’s guess.

Harry,

First off I want to thank you for everything that you did for me. Amelia told me that she filled you in on what happened at the trial, so I won’t repeat any of that.

The fact that you were able to not only listen to my story but also believe me that day is still something that I can’t believe. And then, to hear you tell me that you knew where that traitor was … well, let’s just say that you made me the happiest that I’ve been a long, long time. What you did, saving me, revealing that traitor and helping to get my freedom made me just as proud as I know that your parents would be of the young man that you’re becoming.
At the moment I’m lying here in a bed at St. Mungo’s. The healers tell me that I’m going to be here for a while. Definitely weeks, probably a month or two. They tell me that I’m too weak to leave after my lovely island holiday. Once I’m out of here, though, I’d love to see you again, if you’ll let me. In fact, I’ve got a house here in London. It’s not much and frankly, I reckon that it’s probably needing a fair bit of TLC after being neglected for the last few years. I’d like to invite you there for Christmas. I’ll have Remus come too, so it can be a bit of a ‘family’ affair.

Speaking of family, I don’t know whether you’ve been told or not, but the day that you were born, right after your Dad had first placed you in my arms, he and your Mum asked me to be your Godfather. I’ve been a pretty lousy one so far, but I aim to make it up to you. Part of that duty, though, was that if anything was ever to happen to your parents, then I’d get the job of looking after you.

I was thinking that we could use Christmas as a trial run, to see how well we fit together. If it goes well, and you’d like to, I’d like to offer you a permanent place in my home. I’d like us to be a proper family, with me as your guardian. Don’t think you have to answer now. Think about it and we’ll talk at Christmas and go from there.

Remus tells me that you’ve been writing to him of late and that he’s going to apply to be your DADA tutor. If you haven’t chosen anyone yet, take him on. He knows his stuff and I reckon that you’d learn a lot from him.

Until Christmas (and even beyond), I was hoping that we could write to each other? I’d love to get to know my Godson. There’s so much that I want to ask you. Do you play Quidditch? Which girls have you got your eye on? What’s your favourite subject? Do you have any hobbies? What’s the best prank you’ve ever pulled? (And there had better be one! Your Father, Godfather and Uncle Remus were well-known as THE best pranksters when we went to Hogwarts!) The list could go on and on. And feel free to ask me whatever you want as well. I’d like for you to get to know me too.

Well, Remus is starting to tap his foot at me, so I’d better stop there so that he can bring this to you without being late for his ‘Very Important Interview’.

Take care, Harry. If you ever need me, I’ll be there in a heartbeat.

Love,

Sirius.
Lifting his hand, he stared at his closed fist for several seconds before shaking himself, sighing and knocking solidly on the door.

“Come in!”

Stepping into the office, Harry glanced around only to start as he realised that, instead of being seated behind her desk, Professor McGonagall was waiting for him in one of the arm chairs at the opposite end of her office. Between the two deep red chairs sat a small table adorned with a tea service. Gentle spirals rose from the tea that was being poured into the fine china cups.

“How do you take your tea, Mister Potter?” Professor McGonagall asked, looking up at him.

Confused, Harry let his mouth answer automatically. “Two sugars and a spot of milk, please.”

Slowly, he walked across and sank into the seat indicated to him. The tea cup was placed before him and Professor McGonagall’s ever present biscuit tin was set between them.

After a sip of her own tea, Professor McGonagall leant back in her chair and regarded him over her cup.

“I’m sure that you’re wondering why I asked you here,” she began.

After his cautious nod, she continued.

“Mister Potter … Harry … it’s come to my attention that I owe you an apology.”

Harry’s head snapped up. An apology? That was the last thing that he’d been expecting.

“At the end of last year, you came to me with concerns regarding your … relatives,” she stated. “Please believe me when I say that I believed everything that you told me. I believed that your home life was less than satisfactory. How could I not after having watched them all those years ago? I took your concerns directly to the Headmaster, exactly as I promised that I would, and was assured that Headmaster Dumbledore would insure that your home life improved.

“Afterwards, I neglected my duty. As your Head of House, as someone in whom you had confided in, as your parent’s friend, I should have checked up on you. I should have made sure that something had been done, that things had changed for you. And for that, I am most terribly sorry.”

Feeling his hands trembling, Harry grasped them together. His eyes focussed on the tea pot as his mind whirled. Flicking his eyes up, he took in her face before once again letting his eyes drop. Never before had he had anyone apologise to him. Never had he expected an adult to ever admit that they were wrong or deficient. The entire concept was completely alien to him.

But Professor McGonagall’s face showed nothing but sincerity. It was obvious that she meant every word that she said.

At his single nod of acceptance, a sigh escaped his teacher.

“Thank you, Harry,” she smiled. “I know that an apology is only a small step, but I truly do want to make it up to you.” Here she raised one hand as if to forestall any protest from him. “Not only for not ensuring your well-being this past summer, but also for all the years that you were forced to stay with
those people.”

Once again, Harry nodded.

“If I may, I’d like to verify a few facts with you?” Professor McGonagall asked. “What were the conditions that you were living in before you ran away from the Dursleys?”

“I …I was locked in my room,” Harry replied hesitantly. “Uncle Vernon had put locks on the door and bars on the window. And there was … there was a cat flap in the door so that they could push food in to me every now and again.”

Professor McGonagall’s face darkened even as her eyes flashed with fire.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“Hedwig was locked into her cage and all my Hogwarts things were taken away and locked in the cupboard under the stairs,” Harry replied.

“Thank you, Mister Potter, that correlates with what I understood as well. You can rest assured that you will not be returning there ever again,” Professor McGonagall asserted. “Now, I also understand that you made a magical vow? What is your understanding of the vow that you made?”

“It was when I was at Hermione’s,” Harry replied. “I said that I’d rather lose my magic than spend another night at Privet Dive with the Dursleys.”

“And was there a white flash of light from your wand directly after you made this vow?” At his nod, she continued. “Do you understand what will happen if you ever do spend another night at Privet Drive with your relatives?”

Harry nodded woodenly. “I’ll lose my magic.”

“Exactly. Which is something none of us want,” Professor McGonagall stated firmly. “Now, seeing as the school year has only just started, that gives us time to ensure that the buffoon that left you to suffer in that … place for the last eleven years can’t find some way to send you back there again.”

Harry looked at her quizzically. “I wasn’t intending on going back there.”

“May I ask what you had in mind, Mister Potter?”

“I was thinking of going back to Diagon Alley,” he shrugged.

Professor McGonagall frowned slightly. “While Beth Pemberton is a nice, capable witch and Hermione’s Book Nook would be a wonderful place to spend the summer, it isn’t a practical solution. For one, Ms Pemberton is not your guardian.”

“You’ve met Beth?” Harry asked. “And seen the book shop?”

“Indeed, Mister Potter. I popped across to Diagon Alley this afternoon while you were spending time with Mister Lupin,” Professor McGonagall confessed. “Your shop is simply wonderful and I dare say that there’s sure to be a certain young witch who should be most taken with it as well.”

“Oh, believe me, she is,” Harry grinned.

“But back to the problem at hand,” Professor McGonagall stated. “You are underage, Mister Potter, which means that you need a guardian. A guardian that will make sure that your best interests are seen to. To that end, I would like to offer my services to serve as your guardian.”
Harry dropped back into the chair that he’d been leaning forward in. Feeling his mouth drop open in surprise, he snapped it shut with an audible click.

“I know that this is a bit of a surprise, Harry and I do not expect an answer right now, but the offer is there,” she smiled. “I knew your parents well. Your mother especially was one of my favourites. They even made sure that I had my fair share of cuddles with their new-born son all those years ago.”

“Um, I don’t know what to say, Professor,” Harry finally managed.

“Quite understandable, Mister Potter,” Professor McGonagall replied. “And the decision is entirely yours. However, I’d like to point out that at the current time, by default, as is the case with all muggle-born and any other students without a magical guardian, the Headmaster of Hogwarts assumes that responsibility while you are a student here.”

Harry scowled in distaste of that pronouncement while making a mental note to make sure that Hermione knew about that as well.

“Sirius, Sirius Black, I mean. He’s apparently my godfather,” Harry explained. “He sent me a letter today offering to be my guardian as well. We’re going to talk about it over the Christmas break.”

Professor McGonagall nodded thoughtfully. “As he is your godfather, being your guardian makes sense. I would, however, caution you to remember that Mister Black has suffered extremely over the past decade. That’s not to say that he can’t do a good job, only that he may have difficulties.”

Harry nodded in understanding.

“Of course, there’s no reason why you need to be limited to only one guardian,” she smiled. “A little something to think about.”

Suddenly, Professor McGonagall looked unsure of herself, something that Harry’d never seen before.

“I think that we’ve made a good start today, Mister Potter, but trust takes time and I don’t believe a single meeting will be enough for me to regain yours. So, I was wondering if you might like to do this again. Perhaps we could even make this a weekly event. A chance to catch up and learn a little more about each other?”

For the first time in a long time, Harry firmly looked her squarely in the eye. “I think that I’d like that, Professor.”

-oOoOo-

“Could I get a photo of you and Professor Dungaree, Harry?” the excitable mousey-haired boy asked as he near-bounced on the spot. “And then, maybe you could sign it, too?”

“Sure, Colin,” Harry sighed at the first year Gryffindor, “but I don’t know about the signing bit.”

“Come on, Harry, don’t spoil the boy’s fun,” Mick announced, slinging an arm across his shoulders in a pose for Colin’s ever-present camera.

“Did I hear that correctly, Mister Potter, are you giving out signed photographs?” the despised voice of Professor Lockhart asked as the flash of Colin’s camera announced that the photo had been taken. “I must say, dear boy, that giving out signed photos at this early stage of your career could seem a bit big-headed. It sounds to me as though the two of us could do with spending some time together to
discuss the finer points in the life of a celebrity."

“No, no, Professor,” Harry rushed, whirling around to ward off the horrendous suggestion. “Colin was just practising taking some photos. He’s interested in photography.”

“It did sound to me as though autographs were mentioned,” Lockhart smirked, his ever present smile blinding all those around.

“That’s … that’s just for our promotional poster,” Harry replied, suppressing the urge to groan.

“Promotional poster?” Lockhart questioned.

“Yeah, yeah, you see, Colin and I … Colin and I like … photography,” Harry replied, wishing that he could stare at his own mouth in horror. As much as he tried to stop it, his traitorous mouth just kept going. “Yeah, I got into photography last year. Hermione here, gave me my first camera, you see. And now that Colin’s here, we’re going to start our own Hogwarts Photography Club.”

“We are?” Colin asked, his excitement overruling his previous confusion.

“Yes, Professor McGonagall’s already agreed to sponsor us and everything,” Harry continued.

“Well, Mister Potter, Mister Creevey, if you ever need a subject to practise upon, be sure to come and find me,” Lockhart beamed at them.

“Mick Dungaree,” Mick said to the other adult. “Nice to meet ya. I’m here tutoring Harry and his mates about Magical Cultures of the World.”

“Professor Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, third class, honorary member of The Dark Force Defence League and five times winner of Witch Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award, Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher,” Lockhart introduced himself, shaking the other man’s hand.

“You don’t say!” Mick exclaimed. “Aren’t you the bloke who took care of that werewolf down in Wagga Wagga?”

“You’ve heard of my exploits?” Lockhart beamed.

“Too right, I have. I’m from Down Under meself,” Mick said.

“Have you ever been to Wagga Wagga?” Lockhart asked, for once his trademark smile missing.

“Nah, never got that far south,” Mick waved the idea away. “I’m from the top end. Grew up closer to the merfolk colonies of the Great Barrier Reef. Got as far south as Cooper Peady once, with me folks, but never as far south as Wagga Wagga. Met a couple of werewolves there, come to think of it. Nice blokes. Liked their steaks a bit rare for my liking, but each to their own, eh?”

“Indeed, Mister Dungaree,” Lockhart replied, looking slightly overwhelmed as most people were after spending any amount of time with Mick generally were.

“Yeah, those two were nothing like the pair of sheila werewolves I ran across in the States,” Mick continued, a faraway look on his face. “Now that was a cracker of a couple of weeks. Mind you, the last few days were pretty intense, but then, gotta expect that when the full moon’s approaching and the girls were already a bit antsy with the normal effects of being a girl, if you know what I mean?”

“Hmm, oh, yes,” Lockhart replied.

“Listen, I’d love to stay and compare notes about werewolves, but I’ve got a bit of a date tonight, so
I’ve gotta rush off. Next week, though, if you’re up for it?”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure that’d be fine,” Lockhart replied.

“Righto, then, Harry, Hermione, Col, I’ll see you lot next week, then,” Mick said with a nod before striding off towards the front gates.

“If you’ll excuse us, Professor,” Harry said, “we’ve got an appointment down at the Quidditch pitch.”

-oOoOo-

“Why am I doing this again, Harry?” Hermione asked, worry clear in her voice.

“Because last year we only managed the one lesson. This year, I’m going to make sure that you learn how to fly,” Harry told her.

“But I don’t really want to, Harry. You know I hate heights,” she retorted.

With a nod, Harry motioned for her to mount the broom behind him. “That’s why we’re taking it easy. Today, all you have to do is sit behind me and hold on. Just like last time. Next time, you’ll steer and I’ll hold on right behind you.”

His smile widened as he felt his friend finally comply with his wishes. Her arms snaked around his torso and he involuntarily tensed before forcing himself to relax.

_You’d think that after all of the hugs Hermione gave me when she found out about Hermione’s Book Nook that I’d be used to them by now_, Harry admonished himself.

“Oh, okay, hold on,” he instructed, “I’m going to take us up.”

With a gentle push off, the Nimbus rose steadily into the air.

At first, Hermione’s arms tightened around him. Slowly, the longer that they flew, the pressure around his middle eased. Harry took them on a long, slow loop around the pitch. With each circuit they rose slightly higher until they were able to see over the top of the tallest stands. He felt Hermione’s face turn and lean into his shoulder, a soft sigh escaping her and he smiled, pleased that she was starting to relax with being so high off of the ground.

As they passed the Gryffindor stands once more, a series of bright flashes caught his attention. Looking down, Harry saw Colin standing in the very top row, his camera pressed to his face as he tracked them across the sky.

“What have I done?” he groaned.

“Harry?” Hermione questioned.

Turning his head so that she could better hear him, he explained. “With Colin. I’ve got no idea what came over me. My mouth just seemed to have a life of its own and now I’ve started a photography club?”

“I don’t know, Harry, it could be fun,” she giggled.

With her pressed into his back, he wasn’t able to glower at her the way that he would have liked.

“But it’s Colin! You know how annoying he can be,” Harry protested.
“He’s just excited,” Hermione admonished. “As a muggle-born, everything’s still so very new and interesting. And you heard him. He wants to take lots of photos to send home to his parents.”

“I guess,” Harry grumped before a stray thought crossed his mind. “Guess I’d better go talk to McGonagall once we get back to the castle and ask her to sponsor our club.”

Hermione’s laughter at his predicament was almost enough to ruin the fun of being able to fly once more.

-oOoOo-

It was a tired but content Harry that finally arrived back in his dormitory. The flying lesson with Hermione had gone brilliantly. She even seemed amenable to taking control of the broom herself next time. That’s not to say that she’d stopped complaining about the idea. Quite to the contrary in fact.

Opening his trunk while touching the ‘bowerbird’ engraving allowed Harry to pull up the cupboard feature and to stow his broom away inside. On impulse, he also grabbed out his camera to have it closer to hand. Then, after pushing down the cupboard and closing the lid, he reopened the trunk to its more normal appearance.

A flashing glow immediately caught his attention. Snatching up the Goblin Postal Service box, Harry closed his trunk and retreated to his bed. He found a single, thick letter with the seal of Gringotts waiting inside the box for him.

Mister Potter,

*Please find enclosed parchments detailing the work that has already been completed in relation to the project that we discussed. A list of work that is scheduled to be undertaken in the coming weeks is also included. Please peruse the papers carefully and add, subtract or modify any of the work that you wish to have done and reply as soon as possible.*

*Regards,*

*Slipshard.*

*Potter Account Manager*

With a grin, Harry flipped to the first page, his smile broadening at the heading – Potter Haven.
“Good morning, Hermione. Happy birthday!” Harry beamed from where he stood at the bottom of the stairs.

Hermione met his eyes with a smile. His vivid green eyes were alight with mischief as he watched her descend from the dormitories and she gave an internal sigh of relief.

Ever since she’d told Professor McGonagall about Harry’s summer, she’d been plagued with nightmares of him yelling at her and storming off, refusing to ever speak to her again. She understood completely – it was simply her guilt talking. Harry, she knew, had major trust issues – and with good reason, too, she reminded herself – and she’d broken his trust.

Oh, she knew that telling Professor McGonagall what had happened to him had been as much for her own piece of mind as anything else. Those people had abused her best friend for the last time and she needed to make sure that he wasn’t going to get sent back there again. Especially now that he’d made that vow. And Professor McGonagall could help. Hermione could tell that losing Harry’s trust was something that had distressed her favourite teacher and she’d taken it as a sign that she only had Harry’s best interests at heart.

So far, it had all worked out perfectly. Harry and Professor McGonagall had started to reconcile. Harry was slowly rebuilding his trust in her. And best of all, Professor McGonagall had kept her promise and not divulged where she’d learnt about Harry’s summer. If Harry found out and hated her for it, she didn’t know what she’d do.

“Thanks, Harry,” she said, pushing those distressing thoughts firmly away. Today was her birthday and she was determined to enjoy it.

“Here, I’ll carry that for you,” he said, taking her book bag from her protesting hands and slinging it over his shoulder. “What’ve you got in here, Hermione? It feels like half the library!”

“I’ve only got the books that we need for today and one or two extras for some light reading,” she huffed back.

Once again that mischievous grin of Harry’s made an appearance, causing her to pause with a frown. He was up to something. She was sure of it.

“Shall we head down to breakfast?” he asked.

With a nod, the two of them set out. At the Fat Lady’s portrait, he paused, ushering her through first before quickly speeding up to walk at her side once more. The Great Hall was still only lightly populated when they arrived and, sweeping her gaze over the four long tables, Hermione realised that the two of them were the first of their friends to arrive that morning.

No sooner had the two of them sat in their usual spots, though, than an influx of people materialised, all heading straight for them.

“Happy birthday, Hermione!” Hannah and Susan exclaimed, dropping into the spots opposite them at the Gryffindor table.

A gaggle of laughter announced the arrival of Lil, Sally-Ann, Su, Padma and Lisa. Each girl gave her a brief hug before finding places to sit around them. Last to arrive was Neville. The poor boy nearly froze seeing the animated group, but with only a slight stutter, he managed to wish her a
‘happy birthday’ before sinking into the empty place beside Harry.

“Presents!” Lisa announced loudly, causing those in the hall to turn and stare at the multi-house group.

Hermione found herself deluged with wrapped packages. With the broadest smile that she was sure that she’d ever sported, Hermione began unwrapping them. Usually, there was only something from her parents, and a card or two from her grandmother and her aunt and uncle. This was something extraordinary. There were quills and ink bottles of different colours, books and even some of the finest Honeydukes chocolate.

Just as she was opening the last one – a snow globe with a miniature Hogwarts in it from Hannah – a flash of white wings settled on the table before her.

“Hedwig!” she exclaimed.

Noticing the parcel tied to his leg, she quickly untied it before the owl gave a short bark and hopped across to Harry for her expected bacon treat.

Noting the familiar neat handwriting on the front of it, her eyebrows rose. “It’s from my parents!”

Beside her, Harry dipped his head. “I sent Hedwig down to them. I knew that they wouldn’t be able to send you your present otherwise.”

Wrapping one arm around the boy beside her, she gave a squeeze, noting with pleasure that he didn’t resist or tense up like he usually did.

“Thanks, Harry.”

“Well, what’d you get?” Lil asked.

Turning her attention to the balloon covered wrapping paper – the only wrapping paper with pictures that weren’t animated – Hermione tore into it. A set of five leather-bound, hard cover books tumbled into her hand. Separating each one, she looked through the titles. *A Secret Garden, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Little Women, Anne of Green Gables* and *Peter Pan*.

With a gasp of pleasure, she found and opened the card.

*Our dearest Hermione,*

*Happy Birthday! Knowing you, by now you’ve already opened your present. We know that you miss getting to read books from our world while you’re in the magical world, learning about and seeing all of those wondrous things, so we thought that you might like your own copies of some of your favourites to enjoy when you’re not too busy studying. Enjoy and have a day that’s just as special as you are!*

*All our love,*

*Mum and Dad.*

“Ooh, I love *Alice in Wonderland*!” Lisa announced.

“Are these muggle books?” Susan asked.

“Hold on, before Hermione gets carried away with her new books, there’s still one present left,” Harry declared, pulling a brightly coloured package out of his book bag.
“Oh, Harry, you didn’t need to get me anything,” Hermione told him with a smile, “you already named a whole shop after me.”

“Did I hear you right, Granger? Scarhead, here named a shop after you?” a most unpleasant voice sneered.

Closing her eyes in exasperation, she opened them and turned in her chair to see exactly what she expected: Draco Malfoy flanked, as always, by the two tubs of lard that were Crabbe and Goyle.

“Let me guess,” Malfoy continued, “*Hire A Mudblood*. For a knut they’ll do all the disgusting jobs that even house elves refuse to do.”

“Shove off, Malfoy!” Harry snarled from amongst the silence and glares emanating from the entire group.

“Have you got a problem with me talking to your girlfriend, Scarhead? Although why you’d choose that buck-toothed know-it-all is beyond me. Even you should be able to do better than *that*.”

“Is there a problem here?” a sharp voice interrupted Harry’s retort.

“No, no problem, *Professor*,” Malfoy drawled, “we were just leaving.”

“Then do so, Mister Malfoy and leave these people to their breakfast in peace,” Professor McGonagall glared. After the three Slytherins had departed, she paused to lay a land on Hermione’s shoulder. “Happy birthday, Miss Granger.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Hermione replied, forcing a tiny smile back onto her face.

“Don’t listen to him, Hermione,” Padma stated.

“Yeah, he’s not worth it,” Hannah agreed.

“Besides, you’ve still got to open Harry’s present,” Su reminded her.

With a massive effort, Hermione forced that foul, evil-minded, little toad’s words out of her head and turned to her best friend. For the barest of instances, she caught a look of pure loathing on his face before he switched to that mischievous smile of his once more. After his nudge of the present towards her, Hermione tore into the purple wrapping paper.

A swathe of the most beautiful orange met her eye before the paper fell away to reveal a book bag identical in every way to Harry’s own, save the colour. A cry of delight escaped her lips as she took in the sunset orange of the bag. It was perfect. Her exact favourite shade of colour.

“Harry, it’s beautiful! Thank you!” she exclaimed before engulfing him in a hug.

“It’s just like mine, Hermione. It’s got an extension charm so that it can carry four or five times as much as your old bag, as well as a feather-light charm so that it’ll only ever feel as though you’re carrying two or three pounds,” he told her.

“If that’s all the presents,” Lisa interrupted their hug, “then we’d better have breakfast. Classes start in half an hour.”

With a small gasp and widening eyes, Hermione let Harry go and started to pile her gifts into some semblance of order. It may be her birthday, but that was no reason to be late for class.

-oOoOo-
“Hey, Nev, wait up a minute,” Harry whispered as he clutched at his friend’s sleeve to slow him down.

They had a couple of minutes before Charms class started and Harry felt that now was the perfect chance to clear up a confusion. He waited until the others were out of hearing range before turning to his friend.

“Nev, that word that Malfoy called Hermione. Mudblood. I could tell that he was insulting her, but I didn’t understand what he was implying.”

Neville gave a disgusted look at Harry’s use of the word. “It’s not a nice word, Harry. It’s about the worst word you can use about someone.”

“Yeah, I got that, but what does it mean?” Harry asked.

“It goes back to all that pure-blood nonsense that we were talking about last year,” Neville replied. “Some purebloods believe that having muggles as part of your family dirties the family. It taints the blood. Dirty blood, mudblood.”

“Oh,” Harry replied slowly.

“You know as well as I do that having all magical ancestors doesn’t guarantee that you’ll be any better at magic. Look at Hermione and me for instance. She’s muggleborn and the best in our year, while I’m a pureblood and one of the worst,” Neville stated sadly.

“No, you’re not, Neville!” Harry declared. “You are good at magic. You just need a bit more confidence. Besides, look at Herbology. Not even Hermione’s as good at plants as you are.”

With a shrug, Neville dismissed his comments. “Anyway, that doesn’t stop the bigotry that Malfoy and others like him spout. They’re always going to believe that just because all of their ancestors are magical, then that makes them better than everyone else.”

“Thanks for explaining, Nev,” Harry said.

As they started walking again, Harry turned over what Neville had said. It seemed to him that if someone felt that they were bigger and better than everyone else simply because of their blood, then they might need a lesson to learn the facts of life a bit better. As the muggle saying went: the bigger they are, the harder they fall.

-oOoOo-

While outside the castle it was still warm and a perfectly wonderful evening, down in the depths of the castle’s dungeons, Harry was nearly shivering. It didn’t help that he’d been standing in the same spot, back pressed up against the cold stone wall for nearly half an hour.

While some might think that his plan was a bust, Harry wasn’t quite willing to give up just yet. Especially after what he’d gone through simply to get to that spot.

Claiming tiredness, he’d slipped up bed early only to stuff his pillow and some clothes under his blankets, pull his curtains shut around his bed, secret the all-important tube into his pocket and to don his father’s cloak. Then he’d had to creep back down the stairs, all the while hoping that someone wasn’t going to come barrelling up them and bump into him.

He’d had a stroke of luck at the portrait hole as two seventh years decided to return to the tower at the precise moment that he was wanting to go out it. Slipping past them had been child’s play.
Evading the various prefects, teachers, ghosts and last minute students still wandering the halls, not so much.

Every corridor that he’d ventured down seemed to be filled with people. More times than he could count, he’d been forced to turn sidewards against the wall and either wait for them to pass or for him to edge slowly past them.

The oddest encounter that he’d had had been with a tiny blonde Ravenclaw girl that he was certain that he’d seen before but couldn’t remember where. She’d been drifting from side to side as she seemed to float down the corridor, forcing Harry to backtrack as quickly and as quietly as he could.

The oddest part to the girl was that her large grey eyes were focussed on a small book in her hand as she walked. Every now and again, she’d either frown or laugh at it and then talk to it about something called ‘wrackspurts’ before pausing just long enough to write in it. Thankfully, he’d been able to duck into an open classroom door until she’d passed.

After what felt like hours, he’d finally managed to make his way to the dungeons. Not knowing exactly where he needed to go, he’d wandered the halls until he’d spotted what he was looking for: a pair of green trimmed upper-class students emerging from a hidden doorway. This time he wasn’t quick enough to slip through the open door, leading directly to his current position.

Eventually, he knew, someone would come along and once more open the hidden door. Most likely a couple of prefects, although he supposed that it could just as likely be Professor Snape. After being here for as long as he had been already, he thought that he’d even be able to take that horrid unlikeliness if it meant entrance into the Slytherin common room.

After another gruelling fifteen minutes where Harry was constantly switching which foot to put the most weight on, his salvation arrived. The two fifth year Slytherin prefects were so busy flirting with each other, that neither noticed the brief flash of trainer that emerged as Harry raced through the quickly closing door after them.

Stepping to his immediate right after the door closed, Harry stilled to take a look around.

The room was longer than it was wide and bathed in an eerie green light. Clusters of low-backed black chairs dotted the room, some near the windows that seemed to look out into the Black Lake or near green-flamed fireplaces. A smattering of study tables were pushed against the far walls, directly underneath ornate chandeliers. Tapestries of what Harry presumed to be medieval Slytherins covered the walls between the windows.

As his gaze fell once more on the two older students, he saw what he was looking for: the entrance to the Slytherin dormitories.

Hastily, he weaved his way through the room after the boy down the left hand corridor. He passed door after door, each emblazed with the year of the students beyond it. Finally, he came to the one that he was after: Second Years.

Pressing his ear to the door, he listened carefully. Hearing nothing, Harry eased the door open and slipped inside. Half a dozen four poster beds, not unlike the ones in the Gryffindor dormitories were evenly spaced around the room, only these ones all had deep green hangings. As was in his tower, beside each bed was a small desk and a bedside table.

At the far end of the room was another door. This, he knew, was his true destination. As he was gliding across the room, he was sorely tempted to mess with the sleeping boys. That, he knew, would be a huge mistake. No one must ever know that he was here. An enormous grunt froze him in
place and he watched, terrified as Goyle rolled over, muttering something about kittens in his sleep.

After the large boy had settled once more, Harry continued on.

A soft sigh of relief escaped him as he closed the door to the bathroom behind him. For now, he was relatively safe. That same eerie green glow that encompassed the Slytherin common room was present here as well, meaning that he didn’t have to light his wand to see what he was doing.

A set of six small cubbyholes on the wall to his right caught his attention and he drifted towards them. An evil grin blossomed on his face as he saw that they were all conveniently labelled. His hand hovered over the first, Theodore Nott, before he roughly shook his head and moved to the third. It was best to simply stick with the plan. To prank all of them would only indicate that someone who wasn’t supposed to be there had been there.

Lifting out the bottle of Malfoy’s Sleek-Easy Shampoo, he unscrewed the lip and peered inside. A little over half full. Perfect. Setting the lid down, he reached into his pocket and set to work.
Chapter 20

The next morning Harry took care to seat himself on the side of the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall so that he could easily see across to the Slytherin table. Scanning along its length, he realised that his prey was still to make an appearance. Careful not to give himself away, he turned to Hermione and Neville and joined in their conversation about the *engorio* charm that Professor Flitwick had started teaching them the previous lesson. His eyes, though, constantly strayed to the entrance to the Hall.

Finally, when the Gryffindor trio was close to finishing their own breakfast, Malfoy and his goons made their appearance. Harry watched as the blonde-headed ponce strutted his way across the hall before turfing out a first-year from the seat that he wanted to sit in.

Malfoy, as always, was immaculately dressed, his hair slicked back into a hard shell on top of his head. Surreptitiously, Harry kept a close watch, occasionally glancing at his watch to see how much time had passed. When breakfast came to an end and still nothing had happened to Malfoy, Harry heaved a sigh of defeat.

Following Hermione’s nudge, he gathered up his book bag from under his feet and followed his friends off to Charms.

Professor Flitwick was as excitable as ever as he continued their lesson on engorgement charms. After last lesson’s theory, today was the start of practicals.

“Now, remember everyone, we want a nice firm flick, followed by a clockwise circular motion and a short, sharp jab,” the Professor squeaked. “You all now the incantation – *engorio*, so off you go.”

Harry looked down at the pea in front of him. Closing his eyes, he began practising the wand movements over and over in preparation for his attempt.

A sudden burst of raucous laughter from behind and to his right spun him around. There, the most ridiculous sight met his eyes.

Draco Malfoy was simply glowing. His skin was a deep, rich purple, his hair a blazing neon yellow. Beside him, Greg Goyle was looking horrifyingly between his wand, which was pointing at his friend, and the brilliant purple and yellow that Malfoy’d become.

“What did you do?” Malfoy screamed, staring at his own hands in shock.

“Has anyone got a pair of sunglasses?” Seamus guffawed. “That hair’s blinding!”

“Hair? What do you mean ‘hair’?” Malfoy spun his expression one of mounting horror.

“Your hair’s … yellow,” Pansy admitted reluctantly before handing over a small compact mirror.

“Ahhhh!” Malfoy screamed. “My hair! My face! My eyebrows are yellow!”

“Now, now, Mister Malfoy,” Professor Flitwick said, “there’s no need to panic. I’m sure that it’s a simple colour changing charm gone a little wrong. Although, how Mister Goyle managed *that* when we’re doing engorgement charms is beyond me. Stand still and I’ll set you to rights.”

Harry watched as Professor Flitwick waved his wand over the purple and yellow boy only to see his skin and hair flare brilliantly. When next he was able to look back, it was only to see that Malfoy had changed colours. His skin had changed to fluro pink, while his hair was now a blue so deep that it
was almost black.

“Eek,” Professor Flitwick blanched, “that’s not right. Let me try again.”

This time after Professor Flitwick’s \textit{finite incantatem}, and everyone was able to see again after his flare of light, Malfoy had turned light blue with bright red hair.

The entire class, with the exception of Parkinson, Crabbe and Goyle who seemed to be managing to hide their snickers, were in stitches of laughter. Harry and Neville were laughing so hard that they’d taken to holding each other up even as tears began pouring down their faces.

“Stop that! When my Father hears about this . . .” Malfoy bellowed, although whether at his laughing peers or at the Professor’s attempts to rectify his colour-changing problem was anyone’s guess.

This time, when Malfoy made his own attempts to turn his skin and hair back to their normal colour, his problems multiplied. After the now usual flash of light, Malfoy’s skin had turned into a riot of colours. Every colour under the rainbow flashed and whirled across his face, hands, neck and one would presume the rest of his body in ever changing shades. His hair, though, simply alternated between flashing hot pink and neon green.

“Mister Goyle, I think that you’d better take Mister Malfoy to the Hospital wing,” Professor Flitwick instructed. “Hopefully Madam Pomphrey will be able to put you back to rights.”

Malfoy stormed out of the room even before the instructions had finished being given, leaving Goyle and Parkinson to pack up his bag.

Needless to say that everyone’s pea remained the same size throughout the rest of the lesson. The constant chuckles and occasional bursts of outright laughter prevented anyone from being able to focus enough to achieve any sort of success.

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Harry was delighted to see that Malfoy’s colour-changing woes continued over the several days. At the oddest of times he’d burst into multi-colours. And, according to some of the Slytherins that Harry’d overheard laughing one morning, he’d even woken up that way once or twice. Oddly enough, it took three days before Malfoy (and the rest of the staff) finally realised that trying to use magic to change him back to normal only caused a colour-changing reaction in whatever had been done to him.

“I’d love to shake the hand of the person who keeps pranking Malfoy,” Fred Weasley grinned the Saturday morning after a new colour-changing burst happened in the middle of the Great Hall’s breakfast.

“A real prankster, that one,” George agreed.

“Definitely Marauder-worthy,” Fred continued.

“Marauder?” Harry chuckled as someone shot a burst of magic at Malfoy making the ponce flare and change colours once more.

“Yeah, Marauder,” Fred replied, taking careful aim with his wand nearly flat along the table to keep it out of the view of the professors, “the great legends of the school . . .”

“The pranking masters . . .” agreed George.
“Our heroes,” they finished together in almost loving voices.

A new burst, this time caused by Fred, turned Malfoy red and white just before he escaped out of the Great Hall.

“Thing is though, no-one the same’s ever around the ponce when he first changes colour,” George mused.

Checking his watch, Harry stood, his grin still plastered across his face. “Best be off, boys. Got another flying lesson with Hermione this morning.”

Then, on impulse, he thrust out his hand at first George and then Fred. Confusion reigned in their eyes as their slowly shook his hand. He’d almost made it out the door before a burst of laughter erupted from behind him.

“Oi, Harrikins! Wait for us!”

-ooOoOo-

Finally, after five days of Multi-coloured Malfoy, his bizarre colour-changing penchants came to an end. Harry supposed that he’d finally either figured out that the cause of the problem was in his shampoo. That or he’d finished the bottle trying to wash the colours away.

The Weasley twins were still trying to get Harry to talk, to divulge the secret to his success, but Harry was having none of it. Besides, all he’d *really* done was to provide the means for Draco to prank himself. The *Ever Changing Skin Colour Potion* in the shampoo bottle had worked better than he’d even imagined.

Ingested, it was supposed to work in as little as five minutes. Applied to the skin, results had a two hour delay. But nowhere in the directions did it even indicate that it reacted with hair to form a completely separate colour from the rest of the body. A new bottle was on Harry’s list of imperative items to buy the next chance he had.

Apart from the excitement of a perpetually changing Malfoy and an ever-deepening scowl on Snape’s face, the term continued with little excitement. Classes were progressing well, especially Harry’s special tutorials.

Mick Dungaree proved to be an incredibly popular person, despite the bizarre personality that he exuded. His classes on Magical Cultures of the World were always packed, mostly with Gryffindors and Ravenclaws, but also with a fair amount of Hufflepuffs and even the odd Slytherin and from a wide variety of ages to boot. So far, they’d covered Australia and parts of South America.

Remus Lupin’s Defence Against the Dark Arts classes were always a highlight of Harry’s week. Remus had a knack for making the lessons fun. Often he’d cover some theory before turning whatever they were learning into a game. The favourite of the group of boys so far had to be shield charms. But that may have had more to do with the magical game of ‘paintball’ that Remus had come up with for them to shield against.

True to his word, Harry had kept the class small, only fourteen so far, despite the dozens of others from the other years that approached him. Neville, Seamus and Dean joined him along with the five Hufflepuff and five Ravenclaw boys. One spot Harry kept open for Hermione but, no matter how much they implored her to join them, she remained stubborn in her decision to remain with the ‘Hogwarts approved DADA professor’.

From what he was hearing though, Harry didn’t think that she’d last too much longer. It was down to
a battle between her pride and her desire to learn. And once Hermione joined, Harry was sure that he’d be inundated by the rest of the girls in their study group.

As Halloween approached, Harry felt himself begin to slide into a morose frame of mind. Every time that he thought about the day, his mind was drawn to the fateful events eleven years previously when his parents had been killed. Not even the sight of the dozens of man-sized pumpkins and flights of bats around the Great Hall could completely pull him out of his funk.

“If it’s all the same to you, Hermione, but can we skip the fight with the troll this year?” Harry asked as they, along with Neville, trooped into the Great Hall for the feast.

“Yes, Harry, I think that that should be fine,” she replied formally before bursting into giggles and slapping him on the arm. “Prat.”

And then she launched herself at him and wrapped him in a hug that staggered him back slightly.

“Thank you, Harry. Thank you so much for saving me,” she said into his neck.

“Any time, Hermione,” he replied.

The feast itself was a smorgasbord of delights. Every wonderful thing that anyone could imagine was there. Four different types of roast meats. Twelve different vegetables, roasted, mashed, sautéed and blanched. Tureens of gravy and sauces. Plates and dishes of desserts to make the mouth salivate just at the very thought.

And the food was only half of the delights of the evening. Jokes and japes and conversations were had up and down the table. People table-hopped to spend time with their friends. Indeed, Harry, Hermione and Neville spent most of the feast at the Hufflepuff table along with Lisa, Su and Padma from Ravenclaw. Professor Flitwick had his choir performing songs and all the while, bats soared overhead sending the candlelight flickering.

It was a tired but well satiated group of Gryffindors and Ravenclaws that climbed the stairs sometime later that night intent only on finding their beds and falling head-long into them. That sleepy, content feeling, though, was dispelled in an instant with the first of dozens of screams reverberated down the stairwell from the first floor.

Pushing through with everyone else, Harry, Hermione and Neville struggled to see what the commotion was. The sea of red and blue trimmed cloaks finally split apart and rounded the most bizarre sight that Harry had ever seen

Kneeling on the ground, frozen bare inches from his cat’s eyes was the caretaker, Argus Filch. He seemed to be in mid speech as his mouth was half-open. His eyes were wide as they looked into Mrs Norris’, as though whatever he saw there terrified him. For her part, Mrs Norris was frozen into position, her eyes downcast, her hair and tail stretched on end in fright.

A slight slap of water caught Harry’s attention as he was bumped forward by those behind. Looking down, he noticed a large puddle of water covering most of the corridor floor.

Gasps and whispers drew his attention once more as Hermione tightly grabbed hold of his hand. Looking across at his bushy-haired friend, he noticed that her attention was fixated on the opposite wall. There, written in what he fervently hoped was red paint, was the oddest and most chilling statement imaginable. A cold shiver swept Harry from head to toe as he read it again, the hairs at the back of his neck making their presence known as they stood to attention.

*The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the Heir, Beware!*
“Make way, thank you,” Headmaster Dumbledore intoned as he, Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick stepped through the gathered crowd.

While Professors McGonagall and Flitwick gasped and rushed to the side of the frozen pair, Dumbledore merely stood to one side, regarding the message on the wall. What he made of it, though, was anyone’s guess.

“They’re alive,” Professor McGonagall stated, the relief clear in her voice.

“I think that they’ve been petrified,” Professor Flitwick agreed.

“Prefects. Escort your House to the closest classroom as quickly as possible,” Professor McGonagall instructed. “That one over there should do nicely. Everyone is to keep together. No wandering off. Professor Flitwick and I will be along in a couple of minutes to escort you back to your common rooms.”

The babble of dozens of voices broke out the second that the doors were closed behind the squashed in students.

“What do you think the Chamber of Secrets is?” Harry asked, knowingly echoing half of the people around him.

Hermione shook her head, obviously deep in thought. “I’m not sure. I know that I’ve come across it somewhere.” A low growl of frustration was torn from her. “I’ll have to look it up.”

This, Harry decided, was one bit of research that he’d gladly help with.

-oOoOo-

Unsurprisingly, the entire study group arrived in the library at the same time the following morning.

“Are you guys here to do homework or …?” Lisa asked the group in general.

“I suspect that we’re all here for the same reason,” Hermione replied. “To find out about the Chamber of Secrets.”

Nods all around confirmed her supposition.

“If we work together, we should get our answers that much quicker,” Susan pointed out.

Within seconds, book bags had been dumped around their usual table and the fifteen of them disappeared into the shelving. One by one, they returned, each laden down with one or even four or five books. *Hogwarts: A History*, it seemed, had been a popular choice. No less than six of them had them open in front of them.

“Listen to this, everyone,” Hermione stated, the sacred book open in front of her after they’d all been reading for ten minutes or so. “Salazar Slytherin disagreed with the other Hogwarts founders about the importance of blood purity and the acceptance of Muggle-borns at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. As the other Founders were against him in this matter, he left the school. According to legend, before he left, he created a secret chamber deep underground in Hogwarts Castle — known as the Chamber of Secrets.”

“So the Chamber of Secrets was built by Salazar Slytherin,” Terry said. “That’s a start.”

“I guess that message on the wall stating that the Chamber had been opened confirms that it’s not just
a legend – it’s real,” Anthony stated.

“But if it’s been a secret for the last thousand years to the point where it’s thought to be a legend, how are we going to find out anything about it?” Hannah asked.

By the time a dozen books had been snapped shut and shoved off into the middle of the table in disgust for their uselessness, the feeling around the table was getting low. One by one they were beginning to despair of finding the answers they sought.

“Perhaps we’re going about this all wrong,” Harry mused slowly.

“What do you mean, Harry?” Neville asked.

“If we can’t find out anything about the Chamber directly, maybe we should be looking into finding out about the man who created it,” Harry stated.

“That’s going to be almost as hard,” Su said doubtfully, “I’ve never seen much about Slytherin in the library. He’s almost as secretive as his Chamber.”

“Oh!” Hermione’s startled cry had everyone’s head shooting around to look at her. “I’ve just remembered! I’ve already got the perfect book!”

“You do?” Lisa asked.

“Yes,” Hermione nodded vigorously. “Harry gave it to me last Christmas. *Founding Fathers: The Life and Times of the Hogwarts Four.*”

“You’re right, that’s bound to have lots about Slytherin in it,” Padma smiled.

“And hopefully something about the Chamber of Secrets as well,” Hermione stated.
Chapter 21

As Harry, Hermione and Neville rounded a corridor on the fourth floor later that day, they came upon a sight that froze two of them in their tracks.

This particular corridor that lead to the Transfiguration classroom was lined with nearly a dozen suits of armour. Normally, they, along with the hundreds of others dotted throughout the castle, were a dull silver, their armour long since past its prime.

Filch, whose job it was to keep the castle clean, was forever disparaging the effects of having hundreds of children constantly befouling his castle. One of Filch’s favourite tasks when students were assigned to him for detention was to have them cleaning the castle by hand. Indeed, more than once since they’d been at Hogwarts, the three Gryffindors had heard their fellow students bemoaning having had to polish the suits of armour.

But never had they looked like this. Harry doubted that the armour had ever looked this good even when it had been brand new. Now, almost every suit along this particular corridor shone with a brilliance that was almost blinding. Shields and weapons gleamed, sparkles of light shone off of helmets and breastplates. And it wasn’t just the armour that was looking cleaner either. Cobwebs and the dust of decades had been scoured away leaving the corridor looking like something that actually invited people to walk down it.

As amazing as that scene was though, it wasn’t what brought Harry and Hermione up short. No, that honour was held by the three small creatures that stood at the far end of the hall. All had large, bat-like ears, huge protruding eyes and were identically dressed in a white toga the size of a bath towel. As they watched, one of the three snapped her fingers causing years’ worth of grime to instantly disappear from the last of the suits of armour. A soft gasp escaped Hermione and the three small creatures turned, their eyes widening before, with a soft pop, they disappeared.

“What …what were they?” Hermione asked quietly, as though the creatures could hear her.

“House elves,” Neville replied.

Harry nodded in agreement. “They looked just like Dobby, that weird house elf who started all of my troubles over the summer, except cleaner. And free of injuries.”

“Where’d they come from?” Hermione asked.

Neville shrugged. “They’re always around the castle. It’s just that we don’t see them. That’s part of being a good elf.”

“Are there many here?” Hermione asked, still staring at the spot where she’d last seen the elves.

“Hundreds, I reckon,” Neville replied. “Hogwarts is supposed to have the largest number of house elves in Britain.”

“Please tell me that they get paid for the work that they do?” Hermione pleaded.

Neville looked at her as though she’d just grown a second head.

“Of course they don’t! You don’t pay house elves and I’d say that they’d be insulted if you tried to pay them,” Neville replied.
Seeing Hermione spluttering, Harry made a snap decision. “Straight after class, I’m sending a message to Mick. I think we should learn about House Elves this Sunday.”

-oOoOo-

As Hermione put down the book that she’d been reading, *Founding Fathers: The Life and Times of the Hogwarts Four*, she looked around the table at her study group. The expressions around the table were almost as varied as the number of people who were there.

Some appeared shocked, others overwhelmed by the amount of information that she’d just read out. The Ravenclaws among the group primarily appeared contemplative, although one or two had their heads lowered over the notes that they’d been taking. And then there was Zacharias Smith who appeared to have fallen asleep.

“That’s a lot of information,” Su Li stated, looking up from her parchment, “definitely a *lot* more than I’ve ever seen or read about him before.”

“Should we compare notes?” Lisa asked.

“Okay,” Padma began. “Salazar Slytherin grew up in the fen area of England.”

“Where’s that?” Ernie asked.

“Norfolk, Lincolnshire, that sort of area,” Terry replied.

“He met up with Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff and Rowena Ravenclaw some time or other and then the four of them established Hogwarts at an abandoned castle here. They used their magic to enlarge it and enhance it and hide it away,” Padma continued.

“The four of them worked well together for a couple of decades before there was a big fight between Slytherin and Gryffindor, but no one knows why, before Slythering left and completely disappeared,” Terry summarised. “Most likely to somewhere in Eastern Europe.”

“He excelled in potions and the mind arts,” Lisa stated. “Not to mention what we’d now consider the Dark Arts.”

“And he was a parselmouth,” Hermione intoned.

“What is that anyway? Parselmouth?” Neville asked.

“He could talk to snakes,” Susan replied darkly.

“Oh, could he? I can do that,” Harry commented airily, looking up from his own notes.

The expressions on the majority of the faces that surrounded him caused sweat to break out in the middle of his back and on the palms of each hand.

“What?” he asked cautiously.

“You can talk to snakes, Harry?” Susan asked.

“Yeah,” he replied slowly. “I only found out a bit over a year ago. I accidentally set a snake on my cousin once when we were at the zoo.”

“That’s not good, Harry,” Hermione stated. “Being a parselmouth is a very big deal. Only Dark Lords have ever had that ability.”
Suddenly, Harry’s mouth dried up. His mind whirled as he tried to process not only Hermione’s statement, but also the way that everyone was now looking at him. He didn’t feel like a Dark Lord. He didn’t feel dark at all. Not that he knew what that would feel like.

“I’m not … I’m not going to go dark, am I?” he asked nervously.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Hermione declared, staring around the table.

“Hermione’s right,” Hannah said into the sudden silence. “It’s just Harry. We know him. He’d not the type of guy to go dark. He got rid of You-Know-Who for Merlin’s sake. If we just keep this information to ourselves, then it won’t matter. Alright?”

Slowly, one by one, those around the table nodded but Harry still noticed the furtive glances that he was being shot. And every single one of them looked nervous at the sight of him in amongst their midst.

Unsurprisingly, at least to Harry, the ’Puffs and the ’Claws found excuses to leave very soon afterwards. Dropping his head to keep the pained expression that he knew that he was wearing out of Hermione and Neville’s sight, Harry packed his own bag up, excused himself and rushed out of the library.

-oOoOo-

Over the next days, Harry made a point to distance himself from those he normally hung out with. Once or twice he thought he saw Hermione trying to race after him, but after over a year in the castle, his knowledge of the hidden passageways was good enough to aid him in slipping away from any attempt at pursuit.

In classes or in the Great Hall for meals, Harry continuously saw mistrustful looks directed at him from all those that he’d once spent time studying with in the library. Whether these were real or imaginary didn’t matter. He saw them and, seeing them, his thoughts on how the others saw him diminished until he was left with only one course of action: run. Run and hide.

In every waking moment, in every unconscious moment, Harry became fixated on snakes. The sudden rush of water in the bathroom reminded him of the hiss of snakes. Even his eyes began seeing snakes everywhere he went – on the shield of a suit of armour on the fifth floor; etched onto a wall sconce on the third floor; hidden within a tapestry on the seventh floor.

Even here, in the one place that he’d always found refuge within at Hogwarts had begun to mock him.

Frustrated at the looks that he’d been running from, Harry’d slipped into the tiny cupboard under the stairs to Gryffindor Tower and flung his bag into the far wall. Of course, seconds later, his brain caught up with what he’d done, sending him striding the half dozen steps across the cupboard and dropping him to his knees to survey the damage. Thankfully, this time at least, none of his ink bottles had smashed against the stone wall.

It was as he was hunched over on his knees that he saw it. There, close to the wall, half hidden behind the coil of rope that he usually used as a seat, was a tiny snake carved into the very bottom stone, right beside the floor. With a heave, he shoved the rope away before dropping to his belly, the mess of his bag long since forgotten.

Ever so slowly, he traced the outline of the coiled snake with one finger. Surprisingly, he felt every raised ridge and bump. As he looked closer, the eye of the snake seemed to stare right back at him. It
was almost hypnotising and it was only with a massive effort that he was able to tear his gaze away and shake the cloud-like feeling away.

Looking back, Harry continued to trace the snake with a careful finger, wondering why it was there. That, of course, led his thoughts to the other snake designs that he’d thought that he’d seen in the last couple of days. Having confirmed one, then, it stood to reason that the others had might actually have been real as well.

The answer to the mystery of who could have carved them all was fairly obvious: a Slytherin. But as his mind toyed with the idea, Harry began to wonder whether it had actually been a Slytherin or the Slytherin.

For the longest time, he chewed on his inner cheek before making up his mind. This was something that he needed a second opinion on. It was time to bite the hippogriff’s tail and show Hermione what he’d found.

-oOoOo-

Not for the first time, Hermione wondered what in the world she was still doing there.

“And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how I defeated the Bandon Banshee and saved the people of Surat Thani Province in Thailand,” Professor Lockhart smiled broadly as he twirled slightly, allowing his cape to flare out in a dramatic sort of way. “Please retake your seat, Mister Malfoy.”

For a fraction of a second, Hermione felt sorry for the blonde git. Ever since Harry had ditched Defense Against the Dark Arts, Lockhart had been forcing Malfoy out to the front of the class to reenact various scenes from his books. So far, Malfoy had been forced to portray a werewolf, a yeti, a ghoul and now a banshee, complete with appropriate sound effects, of course.

“Kindly open your book Break with a Banshee to page seventy-two and read over the wand movement and incantation that I used, just as I demonstrated with young Mister Malfoy,” Lockhart instructed.

Moving on pure instinct, Hermione opened the appropriate book, her eyes beginning to skim along the words that she already knew by heart.

Beside her, Lavender and Pavarti gave her identical exasperated looks. She knew what they were saying. What they were probably screaming at her from inside their minds. It was the same thing that the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw girls had been wondering for the past few weeks: how much longer was she going to put up with this idiot of a professor.

Glancing around the classroom at Ron and the Slytherins, Hermione saw identical looks of loathing on all the faces there. Well, perhaps not on Crabbe and Goyle’s faces. The two of them would probably still be thinking Lockhart was a good teacher ten years from now.

Of all the Slytherins, it was Daphne Greengrass, Tracey Davis and Fiona Spinks who she felt most sorry for. The three girls seemed almost okay as far as Slytherins went. They’d never mocked her or abused her or called her names or put her down simply because she was muggle-born. But because of their Houses, they were forced into the role of the ‘enemy’, the ‘hated ones’.

And even when she finally gave in and admitted that Harry was right all along and Lockhart was the worst teacher that they’d ever had, the three girls would be left here with Malfoy and his cronies. Oh, and Ron, of course. There was no way that he was going to even get a chance to switch to Harry’s DADA tute class, not with all the detentions that he still had to serve.
Realising that she’d just reread the same complete drivel for the third time in a row, she heaved a massive sigh. There was simply no getting around it. There was absolutely no chance that she learn anything here. And worse still was hearing the excited chatter between the boys in the common room on Tuesday and Thursday nights. What Professor Lupin had them doing sounded not only useful and important, but fun.

Closing her eyes in defeat, Hermione made her decision. This was not going to be fun. She was always right. Always. But her education was more important than her pride. Wasn’t it? Snapping her eyes open, she slammed her book shut.

Beside her, excited eyes looked to her for confirmation. If she was going to switch to Harry’s class, then they knew that they, too, could as well. It’d been an unspoken decision amongst the girls from all three Houses that Hermione hadn’t even realised at first. Not one of them was going to go to Harry’s class before her.

After giving her two fellow Gryffindor girls a nod, and receiving a squeal of glee in return from Lavender, the three girls stood up.

“Yes, Miss Granger? Is there something that I can help you with?” Professor Lockhart asked, a dashing smile upon his face.

Firmly looking over the lilac-coloured shoulder of the professor to avoid that insidious smile, Hermione squared her shoulders.

“Yes, Professor,” she stated firmly. “I’m sorry, but I feel that I have to withdraw from your class.”

Not knowing what else to say, she promptly hefted her bag and made for the door.

“Us, too, Professor,” Lavender and Pavarti declared, following along behind.

On her way to the door, Hermione’s eyes couldn’t help but meet those of three of the Slytherin girls. Fiona’s face was nearly covered by her short brown bob as a sigh of resignation escaped her. Tracey’s anguished eyes met hers for a fraction of a second before she looked skywards, her black hair falling behind her a wave. The blonde Daphne was the only one to meet her gaze for any length of time. Her icy blue eyes were hard, her face emotionless as she watched the three Gryffindor girls walk past.

Yanking open the door in her exasperation, Hermione was pulled up short at the startled visage of the short, black haired boy leaning against the far wall.

“Hermione?” Harry asked, clearly confused to see her storming out of the classroom. Then, at the appearance of the other two, “Lavender? Pavarti? Is everything okay?”

Hermione found herself pulled up short by Harry’s appearance. When she’d first made her decision, her aim had been to go straight to find her friend and to ask for his forgiveness and then to beg a place in his DADA class. Seeing him standing there, shifting nervously from one foot to the other, though, sent her words flying straight out of her head.

A poke in her side brought her attention back to the here and now.

“Ask him Hermione,” Lavender demanded.

Hermione sighed. “Alright already. Harry. You were right. Lockhart’s a useless teacher and we’re never going to learn anything from him. All we’re doing is listening to him prattle on about stories that I’m starting to find very hard to believe.”
“Hurry up,” Lavender insisted when she petered out.

“Harry, can I join you and Professor Lupin in your Defence Against the Dark Arts classes?” she finally forced out in one massive rush.

Harry’s grin nearly split his face. “Sure, Hermione. You only had to ask.”

“Us, too, Harry?” Pavarti and Lavender immediately chorused.

“Yep, there’s still a few spots left,” Harry agreed.

“Thanks, Harry,” the two girls smiled before heading off in the direction of Gryffindor Tower.

Suddenly Hermione’s brain caught up with what had been bugging her from the instant that she’d seen the bespectacled boy outside the classroom.

“Harry? What are you doing here?”

Harry’s nervousness instantly reappeared. “There’s something that I want to show you, Hermione. Do you have time to come with me now?”

“Well, as I’ve just ditched the second half of Defence, I really should go and see Professor McGonagall, but I guess that I can do that later. Okay, Harry, what do you want to show me?”
“Well, they’re definitely real and definitely a mystery,” Hermione concluded.

Harry nodded, glad that she felt the same way about all of the half-hidden snake motifs that he’d found in odd locations around the castle.

“And the fact that most of the snakes are in the same design lends credence to the theory that they were all done by the same person,” Hermione continued. “Although who that could be, is anyone’s guess.”

“I … I did have a theory about that,” Harry said hesitantly. At her upraised eyebrow and expectant look, he continued. “I wondered if maybe Salazar Slytherin himself might have engraved them.”

Hermione froze mid-step, obviously turning the idea over in her mind. “They’ve definitely been there for a long time, judging by how faded a lot of them are. And they’re in the same style as his personal design, not like the more elaborate snake design used by Slytherin House these days. It makes sense. Unfortunately there’s no proof to confirm it. Why would he have done it though?”

Harry shrugged. “No idea.”

“I’m glad that you’ve stopped avoiding me, Harry,” Hermione suddenly blurted, changing topics. “There was no need for it, you know. Just because you can … you know, doesn’t change how I feel about you. You’re still my best friend.”

“Thanks, Hermione,” he near whispered through the lump in his throat. “But what about the others? I’ve seen how they’ve been looking at me.”

Hermione humphed. “I think you’ve been seeing what you want to see instead of what’s really there. There might be one or two who aren’t sure what to think and you being an idiot and distancing yourself from everyone like you have been hasn’t helped. But if you come back to hanging out with us again and studying with us in the library, they’ll get over it quickly enough.”

“Alright, Hermione, I guess you’re right,” Harry sighed. “I suppose I was being a bit of an idiot.”

“Of course I’m right. Aren’t I always?”

Harry gave her a wry smile before coughing into his hand. For some reason his cough of ‘Lockhart’ only caused her to give a sniff and stalk off up the hallway, leaving him running to catch up.

He finally caught her up just outside the library, a place that Harry hadn’t entered since his ability to talk to snakes had been announced. Obviously sensing his hesitancy, Hermione grabbed hold of his hand and half-dragged him inside and across to the thankfully empty table that they usually sat at.

Dumping their bags, both set off into the labyrinth of bookshelves in search of texts for their assignments. Their search was waylaid by the sounds of a tinkering laugh followed by the an airy voice uttering words that, joined together in that particular fashion, made absolutely no sense to either of them.

“Oh, Tom, I think some nargles have made off with your common sense again,” the voice laughed. “Either that or you’ve become infested with wrackspurts.”

Creeping along the shelves, Harry finally found the place closest to the strange voice before
removing a handful of books allowing him to peer through into the next aisle over. There he saw the same small blonde-haired girl that he’d encountered weeks ago when he was out at night under his invisibility cloak.

The girl was standing in the middle of the aisle, a small leather-bound book in one hand, a quill furiously scribbling away in the other. Harry had the impression that she was actually dictating her words into the book. As she turned slowly in place, Harry was able to get a closer look at her.

His eyebrows rose in surprise as he realised that her earrings were in fact made of radishes and the necklace she wore was made of butterbeer corks. The blue trim of her cloak indicated that she was obviously quite intelligent, although, to all appearances, also quite odd as well.

“Now, Tom, that’s enough of that,” the girl continued. “And there’s no call to be rude in the slightest. Just because you’ve not encountered something does not mean that it can’t exist. I offer you the evidence of your brain. Can you see it?” She paused as though waiting for an answer before continuing. “Exactly. You cannot see it, but it exists. Although, where you might keep your brain is something to ponder.”

Absently, the girl stuck her quill behind her ear, beside her wand of all things, before reaching out and plucking a book off of the shelves although Harry could have sworn that she hadn’t once looked in that direction.

“Yes, this should do, I think,” her airy voice stated matter-of-factly. “We’ll soon have your brain cleared of wrackspurts.”

Then, still talking to her little book, she wandered away.

“Well, that was … unexpected,” Hermione managed.

All Harry could do was nod his agreement.

A little later, Harry found himself in the same aisle of books that the girl had been in before. Curious, he ran his finger along the spines until he came to a gap. Looking to either side of the missing book, he wondered what in the world the girl had wanted with a book about cleansing rituals.

-oOoOo-

Rising from his seat, Albus Dumbledore stretched. He’d been working steadily at his desk for more hours in a row than he could count. Running a school in conjunction with his duties as Chief Warlock and being the country’s representative on the ICW could be quite demanding, not to mention tiring, at times. But there was no way that he’d even consider giving up one or two of those prestigious posts. Not if he wanted to ensure that it was his hand guiding and shaping the future for magical Britain.

Noticing his phoenix, Fawkes, roosting on the window ledge behind him, Dumbledore turned and took the required steps to bring him to his side. As his hand absently stroked the beautiful red and gold plumage, his gaze wandered to the view before him.

From this vantage point, he could see the sweeping vista from the Black Lake with the majestic mountains rising on its far side, across the Forbidden Forest and to the rolling countryside that extended beyond the school grounds to the east. Bringing his gaze down, Dumbledore surveyed the school grounds. Students dotted the lawns and laughed and played below, obviously enjoying what was sure to be one of the last days of sunny weather before the snows began.

Movement above the stands of the quidditch pitch caught his attention and he looked to see which
team was out practicing. The Quidditch Cup was always a fiercely fought competition, one that always enhanced the rivalries between the Houses, a notion that Dumbledore was always keen to foster. Dividing the students made guiding them down the correct path so much easier.

Noticing only a single broom in flight, he frowned, wondering who it could be. And then he registered that the broom had not one but two people on it. His frown quickly turned into more of a scowl as he realised that Mister Potter was out once again teaching Miss Granger how to fly. This was not acceptable. Now that he knew what he was seeing, details became easier to see, especially when he made use of one of the enhancements of his glasses.

This time, young Harry was seated behind Miss Granger, his hands wrapped around her waist. It was bad enough when their positions were reversed. This, was worse. Much worse. Watching the two zip from one side of the pitch to the other, Dumbledore made a note to himself to do something to separate the two young people.

Harry’s destiny was already set. He was to grow up under the guidance of Dumbledore himself until it was time for him to face Tom and readily sacrifice himself for the Greater Good. He needed something to die for, not something to live for. Girls would only be a distraction, not a problem that Dumbledore himself had ever had to face.

Thinking about the problem at hand, Dumbledore’s prestigious mind sought a way through the possible complication. A girlfriend would only lead young Harry to want to survive. However, a girlfriend in danger could be something that Harry’d sacrifice himself for.

The girl would have to be carefully selected of course, especially if Tom took longer to return to his body than Dumbledore anticipated. If, in that unlikely event, Harry reached his age of maturity, and merlin-forbid, chose to marry, then the Potter fortune could be put out of Dumbledore’s reach. And that was not something that he was willing to allow.

Running over the names of girls in not only Harry’s year, but also in the years directly above and below, Dumbledore sought one who could be persuaded to do the right thing. She would have to be a pureblood, or at the very least a half-blood, of course. It wouldn’t do to have a muggleborn with all of their modern ideas at all. The girl being from a Light family, narrowed the search even more. And the fact that she’d have to be from a family that looked up to and respected the Leader of the Light reduced the possibilities to a manageable number.

With those few in mind, Dumbledore turned away from window and headed towards his office door. A turn or two around the castle seemed to be in order.

-oOoOo-

The corridor to the classroom that they’d been assigned for their Magical Cultures of the World tutorial was nearly jam-packed by the time that Harry, Hermione and Neville arrived. Black cloaked people with red, blue and yellow trim lined the area, shuffling aside to make a path for the three Gryffindor second years to reach the classroom door.

“Hi, everyone!” Harry said loudly, his nerves lessening each time that he had to face the crowd. “Mick should be here soon. How about we wait inside?”

Murmurs of agreement were intermixed with multiple greetings as one by one, the crowd disappeared through the door. Aside from the group that met in the library that made up the bulk of the Hogwarts second years, the members of the tutorial had branched out to encompass people all the way up to seventh years and from three of the four houses.
The Gryffindor Quidditch team passed by in a single group mass. Colin Creevey and Damien O’Hara from the Photography Club entered next, followed by a giggly bunch of fourth year Hufflepuff girls. Next came all of the blue-trimmed Ravenclaws. If there was going to be one group that wouldn’t turn down a chance to learn something new, then it was bound to be from the House of the Eagles.

Just as Harry was ushering Hermione and Neville in before him, a lone girl glided by with an absent sort of look upon her face. Harry’s eyebrows rose at the unexpected sight of the Girl-Who-Talks-To-Books.

The room itself was packed. Most of the desks had been pushed into a row against the back wall, allowing more room for the couple of dozen chairs set out in rows facing the blackboard. Three chairs had been left in the centre front row between Hannah and Susan on the right and Sally and Lisa on the left. The three Gryffindors had barely taken a seat when the door to the room opened once more.

“G’day everyone, sorry I’m late,” Mick said with a wave as he strode in.

Throwing his hat onto the big teacher’s desk, along with the satchel he used as a briefcase, Mick Dungaree hitched one hip up onto the desk and surveyed the crowd.

“Looks like everyone’s here. With one or two new faces, I see,” he commented. “Well, I’d originally planned for us to finish up our discussion of the people of Macchu Picchu today, but instead, Harry’s requested that we talk about House Elves. Harry?”

Rising, Harry turned to face the crowd. “I hope everyone doesn’t mind, but after what happened with Mister Filch …”

“The great git,” was mumbled from somewhere in the back where the Weasley twins were sitting.

“I noticed that the House Elves are doing more of the cleaning around the castle,” Harry continued. “So, I thought that since we’re likely to see them, we really should learn something about them.”

“Makes sense to me,” Mick stated as Harry retook his seat. “Now, I personally haven’t come across many House Elves, so, I figured that the best way to learn about them is straight from the hippogriff’s mouth so to speak. Tippy!”

At Mick’s call, a soft pop of an arriving House Elf sounded in the middle of the room. As far as Harry could see, this could have been one of the elves that he’d seen the other day. He had large, droopy ears, brilliant blue eyes the size of tennis balls and had a large nose that currently looked like it was quivering. His toga-like outfit, Harry noted, was decorated with a Hogwarts crest on the right side of his chest.

“Everyone, this is Tippy,” Mick introduced. “Tippy’s one of the Hogwarts House Elves who’s agreed to help us with today’s lesson.”

“Hello, Tippy,” two dozen voices chorused back.

“Heelloo Hoggwyarty students,” Tippy said shyly.

“Hello, Tippy,” two dozen voices chorused back.

“I thought that we might start with Tippy telling us what sorts of jobs the Hogwarts House Elves do,” said Mick. “Tippy?”

“We’s do everything that needs to be done,” Tippy began almost nervously, before his voice gradually gained not only confidence, but strength and volume. “We’s clean the castle and the
common rooms at night. We’s set up classrooms and move the trunksies when the Hoggywarty students first come to Hoggywarty. We’s do all the cooking. Some elves look after the grassies and plantsies on the Hoggywarty grounds. We’s fix things and do whatever the professories wants us to dos.”

“How many House Elves does Hogwarts have, Tippy?’ Mick asked.

Tippy cocked his head in thought for a second before answering. “One hundred and twenty one.”

“If there’s so many of you and you do all of that, how come we don’t see you?’ Katie Bell asked.

Tippy’s chest puffed out in pride as he answered, “we’s good elves.”

“A mark of a good House Elf is that they’re rarely, if ever, seen,” Mick elaborated. “They’ll make sure to get their jobs done at a time that they’re not likely to interfere with or disturb the witches and wizards that they take care of.”

“How can House Elves get around without being seen?’ Colin asked.

“We’s pop where we need to go,” Tippy replied.

“Do you mean you apparate?” Hermione asked. “But you can’t apparate at Hogwarts. It says so in Hogwarts: A History.”

“Elf magic not like wizard magic, miss,” Tippy countered.

“What else can your magic do?” Marcus Belby, one of the Ravenclaw group, asked.

“We’s can do all manner of magic, just like wizards and witchies but without wandsies,” Tippy replied, frowning as she tried to answer. “We’s can repair things and move things and pop things and make wardsies and all kinds of magics.”

“House Elf magic is just as strong as wizard magic,” Mick continued, “but on a different wavelength, I guess. Almost all witches and wizards forget just how powerful they are. They may be small and hardly ever seen and serve witches and wizards, but that doesn’t mean that they’re not just as capable.”

“How can we get our own House Elf?’ Lee Jordan asked from where he was sprawled along the back tables.

“Unfortunately, that’s something the rich fellas seem to keep a tight hold on,” Mick replied. “I’m not sure about in other countries – there aren’t that many Down Under and I haven’t checked out House Elf populations around the world – but here in the UK, the rich seem to have the monopoly on House Elves. Most Ancient or Noble Houses seem to keep at least one or two around.”

“But they get paid, right?’ Hermione asked, seemingly ignoring Neville’s answer to that very question from the other day.

“Nah, not House Elves,” Mick replied.

“Why would yous be wanting to insult House Elves, miss?’ Tippy near wailed.

“I’m not trying to insult you,” Hermione replied. “House Elves serve witches and wizards and they should be rewarded for doing so. They earn the reward. They earn the right to wages.”

“No, no, no, House Elves are happy to serve out masters and mistresses. We not wanting wages,”
Tippy replied, shaking his head so hard that his ears flapped about his head.

“You’ve got the wrong end of the stick there, Hermione,” Mick stated. “House Elves need witches and wizards. They … well, for want of a better word, they tap into their master’s magic. They need it to survive. It’s symbiotic, I guess. They get the magic they need, witches and wizards get a loyal servant. It’s a bond that House Elves want to have, that they need to have.”

Harry’s mind whirled backwards a couple of months to the sight of the very first House Elf that he’d ever seen. That relationship didn’t seem very symbiotic. More one-sided, he guessed, especially with all of the bandages that Dobby was wrapped in, let alone the way that he kept trying to hurt himself and threaten to iron his own ears.

“What about if a witch or wizard hurts their House Elf. Can the elf leave and go find a better master?” he asked.

Mick’s expression hardened. “That’s the one down-side to the wizard-house elf bond. Once the bond is created, it’s for life. The House Elf is bound to serve their master, no matter what. If the elf is being abused, they can’t just leave.”

“That’s barbaric!” Hermione protested. “Do you mean that there’s no way for the bond to be broken?”

“Sure there is, just give the House Elf clothes and they’ll be set free,” Mick replied. “But there aren’t many witches or wizards that are going to do that. The ones who own House Elves are usually pretty careful about even accidentally tossing a piece of clothing around that could unintentionally land anywhere near a House Elf.”
The flash of violent purple smoke announced to the world that Colin Creevey had taken yet another picture.

Winding the camera on, Colin looked around at the crowd, trying to decide what his next shot should be. Gryffindors all around him were bedecked in red and gold scarves and banners and streamers. Already he’d taken half a dozen photos of the crowd and the teams hadn’t even made it onto the pitch yet.

In the interests of fairness, Colin turned his gaze to the other four stands around the Quidditch pitch – one for each of the Houses, plus the smaller one for the professors. At the opposite side of the pitch, silver and green dominated. Whistles, cat-calls and jeers came from the snakes, directed not only at the Gryffindors but also the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. Both of those two towers seemed dominated by Lions supporters.

Which, to Colin’s way of thinking, made sense. From everything that he’d heard, the Slytherin Quidditch Team had cheated their way to the win the Cup for seven years before Harry Potter had joined the Gryffindor Team the year before to finally wrest it away from their grasp.

The roar of a lion erupted around the ground, drowning out everyone else and Colin spun around. His eyes darted this way and that before finally, he spotted the source of the noise. Grinning from ear to ear, he brought his camera up and focused in, once more lamenting that wizard cameras didn’t come equipped with a telephoto lens like cameras did in the muggle world.

The image in his view steadied onto the elaborate lion head-dress and he gently squeezed the button. As he wound the camera on, he continued to look across at Luna Lovegood. She was different, quirky and always seemed good for some weird titbit of information that he’d never heard before. And there was just so much that, growing up in the muggle world, he didn’t know. Colin smiled as he noticed that, finally, that ever-present little book that she was always walking around with and talking to wasn’t to be seen. Thinking on it, he realised that it’d been a few days since he’d seen it. And Luna appeared happier without it as well, which was good.

“Aaand, here they come, ladies and gentlemen, the Quidditch teams for this match,” Lee Jordan, one of Gryffindor’s fourth year’s announced.

Hurriedly, Colin spun around, bringing his camera up to get some action shots of the teams as they emerged from the tunnel.

“First up is Slytherin!” Lee continued. “Captained once again this year by Markus Flint, the big talk for his year’s team is the Nimbus Two-Thousand and Ones that each team member was bribed with for letting Draco Malfoy join the team.”

“Jordan!” Professor McGonagall warned the announcer.

“Sorry, Professor,” Lee said sounding incredibly unapologetic. “Did I say ‘bribed’, no, no, I didn’t mean ‘bribed’, I meant gifted. Yes, gifted. The Slytherin team was gifted with brand new brooms. A present from the father of Slytherin’s brand new Seeker, Draco Malfoy.”

All the while, Colin’s camera was going crazy. His finger was clicking and winding away furiously.
He was sure that he’d managed to get a photo of every player as they flew out of the tunnel, but he wouldn’t know for sure until he developed them later. At Lee’s next announcement, Colin’s finger flew even faster, attempting to snap each of the Gryffindor team, especially Harry.

“Aaaand here comes the Gryffindors! Captained once again by that Keeper extraordinaire, Oliver Wood, ably assisted by those three beautiful, perfect chases, Johnson, Spinnet and Bell, those two unbeatable Beaters, the Weasley twins and, of course, last but certainly not least, the Seeker to end all Seekers, Haaarrry Potter!”

Realising that his film was at an end, Colin quickly opened the back, popped out the used film which he dropped into one pocket before fishing out and installing a new canister into the back of the camera. He was just finishing winding the film on to a ready state when Madam Hooch sent the quaffle high into the air to start the game.

The play was thick and fast and Colin had no idea where to look first. This was his first ever Quidditch game and, even after having watched a couple of the Gryffindor practises, it hadn’t prepared him for the real thing. The six chasers, three red, three green, zoomed across the sky above, the red quaffle zipping from one to another almost too fast for the eye to see.

At either end stood three enormous poles with hoops at their tops. Seeing the Slytherin chasers bearing down on one end, Colin brought his camera up and began snapping away, in the process getting a superb action shot of Wood whacking away the quaffle with the tail of his broom. Cheering along with the crowd, Colin searched for where to take his next photos.

An arrowhead of red and gold streaked back across the pitch, Angelina Johnson with the quaffle tucked hard against her side made the perfect choice. Suddenly, a blur of red materialised right in front of him, startling Colin backwards in his seat, the camera nearly falling from his hands. He looked up to see a broad red back with a yellow number six right in front of him, one arm swinging a bat to crack spectacularly with the black bludger, sending it on its merry way.

Once he’d righted himself, Colin spent the next couple of minutes taking multiple shots of the Weasley twins smacking the single bludger at the opposition. Seeing that he’d taken shots of all of the Gryffindor team but one, Colin searched the sky for his hero.

And there he was, the guy who’d not only saved the wizarding world, but the guy who shared a passion for photography just like him! His friend, believe it or not. Harry Potter.

As Colin watched, taking shot after shot, he wondered about the game of Quidditch. If he understood it correctly, Harry’s aim was to catch a tiny golden ball. He didn’t remember there being anything about having to constantly dodge one of the bludgers to do it. Frowning in thought, he looked across at the Slytherin Seeker. He was simply flying lazy circles of the pitch, not bothered by anything in the world, unlike Harry’s constant dodging and weaving, flipping and turning on a hairpin, the Weasley twins now shadowing him as close as they could.

Turning to the person beside him, who, it turned out, happened to be Ginny Weasley, he asked, “how come Harry has to constantly have that bludger following him around and the other Seeker doesn’t?”

“What? What bludger?” Ginny asked, momentarily looking at him before searching the sky for herself.

He heard a sharp intake of breath before a muttered, “that’s not right.”

Obviously, whatever the problem was, the Gryffindor team had noticed it too, for Captain Wood
called for a time out. After a brief talk, or perhaps argument, in the middle of the pitch, the seven remounted their brooms and took to the sky once more.

Colin watched as Harry flew higher than anyone else, that single bludger once more hot on his tail.

“I don’t know what my brothers think they’re doing,” Ginny groused, “but it certainly isn’t their job.”

“What do you mean?” Colin asked, even though he was pretty sure Ginny’s comment was more to herself than to him.

“The Beater’s job is to stop the bludgers from injuring their team mates,” Ginny explained. “By ignoring the bludger that’s fixated on Harry for some reason, they’re leaving him wide open to get hurt. And if he gets hurt, then they’re in for a world of pain!”

Suddenly, Harry seemed to come to a standstill, a decision that very quickly cost him. Just as Colin snapped a shot of him, the bludger finally caught up, smashing into his arm. Colin winced in sympathy, especially as he saw the look of pain and anguish on Harry’s face.

But instead of making his way to the ground, Harry zoomed back off across the sky. A glint of gold caught his attention out of the corner of his eye and he realised what it was that Harry was doing.

Quickly reloading a new film canister into the camera, Colin began snapping away at the race across the sky. The golden snitch led Harry and the Slytherin Seeker a merry dance from one side of the pitch to the other. Just as Colin was sure that the Slytherin was going to win, Harry took his one good hand off of his broom and grabbed the snitch. Colin was sure that he got the exact moment on film. He couldn’t wait to get back up to the castle to develop his photos and see.

As he was jumping up and down on the seats in excitement with the rest of his house, his throat starting to go hoarse with yelling, Colin noticed a terrifying sight in the centre of the pitch. Professor Lockhart was bearing down on a Harry scrabbling backwards on the grass, trying to get away from the wand pointed at him.

A fraction of a second before light erupted from the Professor’s wand, Harry gave one last lurch backwards. The yelling and screaming coming not only from Harry, but also his friends who’d just arrived on the scene, was unintelligible but clearly directed at the incompetent teacher. How Colin wished that he could be in Harry’s DADA class instead of with that buffoon.

Colin watched as Neville Longbottom got an arm under Harry’s good arm and heaved him upright. Instantly, Harry tilted away, nearly bringing Neville with him. Luckily, Madam Pomphrey seemed to have everything in hand, for she levitated the injured boy upwards.

Colin could only stare at Harry’s left leg. The way it was flopping about, he’d swear that it was made of jelly instead of bones and muscles and stuff.

-oOoOo-

A sudden unexpected weight on his good leg shot Harry up.

The hospital wing was dark, only the few slithers of light coming through the windows allowed him to see at all. On the bed, atop his lower right leg, a dark shape sat, watching him. While staring intently at the unknown … thing … Harry groped the bedside table for his glasses. Finding them, he put them on and focused once more.

“Dobby?” he asked, noting the long bat-like ears, enormous green tennis ball eyes and bandage
wrapped around the misshapen head.

“Mister Harry Potter Sir remembers Dobby!” the elf cried in glee.

“You’re pretty hard to forget, Dobby,” Harry countered. “What are you doing here?”

“Dobby warned Mister Harry Potter Sir not to come back to Hogwarts, but Mister Harry Potter Sir did and now bad things are happening,” Dobby replied sadly.

“Bad things?” Harry asked, his brain still catching up to the fact that he was now awake. “What bad things?”

“The same bad things that happened at Hogwarts once before,” Dobby intoned.

“Happened before? Wait. Do you mean Filch and Mrs Norris being petrified? The Chamber of Secrets was opened before?” Harry asked.

Dobby slowly shook his head, his large eyes filled with sadness. “Why, oh why, did Mister Harry Potter Sir have to come back to Hogwarts? It would have been better for all, better for Mister Harry Potter Sir. Safer, if he’d just listened to Dobby and stayed away.”

“I wouldn’t stay away, Dobby, especially if there was danger. I’d want to be here with my friends, helping them,” Harry stated forcefully.

At this Dobby near wailed. “Oh, how great Mister Harry Potter Sir is! How noble and giving to want to protect his friends! Dobby should have known that his barrier would not stop one so great, so wonderful as The Great Harry Potter Sir!”

“Wait! What? Your barrier? Do you mean that you’re the reason that the barrier wouldn’t let anyone through at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters?”

As Dobby sadly nodded his head, Harry went to reach out to grab the little elf. Unfortunately, even though Madam Pomphrey had mended his broken right arm, it was still incredibly stiff and sore, forcing him to gasp out in pain and slump back on the bed.

“Mister Harry Potter Sir is in pain from Dobby’s bludger,” Dobby stated before clicking his fingers.

Harry looked cautiously at the vial that Dobby now held out for him. “What is it?”

“Pain relief potion. Professor Greasy-Bat has a whole cauldron full in his smelly room,” Dobby replied.

“Professor Greasy-Bat? Professor Snape? Is that who you mean?” Harry laughed. Then, with a shrug he accepted the potion. Just as he was about to scull it, a thought hit him, narrowing his eyes. “What do you mean ‘Dobby’s bludger’?”

“Dobby charmed the bludger to chase after Mister Harry Potter Sir,” Dobby replied miserably. “Dobby had to iron all his fingers for hurting the Great Harry Potter Sir, but it be all worth it if only the Great Harry Potter Sir says that he be leaving Hogwarts now.”

Harry stared at the hopeful expression. “Dobby! You could have killed me!”

“Oh, no, Mister Harry Potter Sir,” Dobby shook his head so hard that his ears flapped around his head. “Never kill you. Injure you grievously perhaps. Make you want to leave Hogwarts yes. But never kill you, Sir.”
“Why do you want me to leave Hogwarts and my friends, Dobby?” Harry asked, deciding to change tacks.

“Mister Harry Potter Sir needs to leave Hogwarts so he isn’t hurt!” Dobby exclaimed. “Bad things are happening and Mister Harry Potter Sir is too important. He banished the Dark Wizard and now Dobby’s kind are treated better. Not Dobby, though, never Dobby. Dobby is still treated like vermin.”

Harry stared at this last, his eyes roving over the dozens of bandages and the filthy rags that Dobby wore now that his eyes had adjusted to the light.

“Mister Harry Potter Sir should go away from Hogwarts. Take your friends, Mister Harry Potter Sir and run away. Do this for Dobby. Please Sir,” Dobby continued, his hands grasped together as he fell to his knees between Harry’s legs.

“Dobby, I … I can’t,” Harry replied.

“Mister Potter?” Madam Pomphrey’s voice called out of the dark at the far end of the hospital wing. With a snap of his fingers, Dobby popped away, leaving a stunned wizard sitting up in bed.

“Mister Potter? Did I hear you talking to someone?” Madam Pomphrey asked as she rounded the screens surrounding his bed.

“No, Ma’am,” Harry replied.

One hand came up to rest on his forehead even as she waved her wand over his arm and then over his leg.

“The Skele-Grow is working nicely, Mister Potter, but you need your rest if you’re going to heal properly,” Madam Pomphrey told him. “I suggest you lay back down and go back to sleep.”

Without even thinking, he obeyed. Madam Pomphrey gave a short nod, a gentle pat on his good leg and left him be.

A sharp pain in his bad leg caused him to wince, a hiss managing to escape him. Realising that he still had the pain relief potion that Dobby had given him in his hand, Harry quickly downed it and tried to settle in for what was left of the night.
Chapter 24

Rip ... Kill ... Tear ... So Hungry ... So Long ... Need to Kill ...

Harry froze half-way down the hidden stairway between the fourth floor and the second floor. The voice had come out of nowhere. Spinning around, he stumbled, lost his balance and slipped further down the stairwell. By the time that he’d recovered his balance, the voice had gone.

Slowly, hesitantly, he retraced his steps, running a gentle hand along the wall where he thought that he’d heard it. The rough stone wall under his fingertips gave no hint that there were any other secret passages nearby. He was all alone.

The … voice must have been his imagination. Harry shivered at the thought. What in Merlin’s name was his imagination doing thinking something like that?

Hesitantly, he gave the wall one last nervous look over before shrugging his book bag more firmly onto his shoulder and resuming his journey towards the Great Hall. Dinner awaited. Hearing strange, disembodied voices promising violent death needed to be put far, far from his mind.

Reaching the tapestry covering the entrance to the passageway, Harry slipped out, determinedly deciding to avoid going that way from now on. And also to ‘forget’ to mention what he’d heard to his friends. He hated to think about the way that they’d look at him if he did mention it.

-oOoOo-

Mid December saw a notable air or excitement permeate Hogwarts Castle, one that wasn’t related to the myriad Christmas decorations that had begun appearing. Nor was it due to the fact that there was only a few days left of term before the Christmas holidays. No, this excitement was directly related to a notice that Seamus found pinned onto the Gryffindor notice board one morning.

“There’s gonna be a duelling club!” he announced.

“Where? When?” different voices asked from around the common room.

“Let’s see. Next Wednesday night, Great Hall, seven o’clock,” Seamus read. “What do you guys reckon?”

“I’m in,” Dean immediately declared.

“Yeah, could be good to learn how to duel,” Neville agreed.

“Sounds like our Wednesday night’s planned then,” Harry stated.

As the day drew closer, theories were bandied around about who would be leading the Duelling Club. Some thought Professor Flitwick. There was a rumour that he’d been an international standard duelling champion when he was younger. Others thought Professor Snape would lead it, considering that it was no secret that he’d been coveting the Defence position for years. One or two even suggest Dumbledore himself, reasoning that he had defeated the Dark Lord Grindewald back in the day.

Harry’s opinion was fairly firm. “Just so long as it’s not Lockhart. I think I could handle it being anyone else, but not him.”

That fear, it seemed, had been completely justified when, from out of the teacher’s entrance to the
Great Hall, the plum-coloured ponce bounded up onto the stage that had been conjured for just this event. His teeth were doing that *ting* effect thing that he loved as he flashed his smile at the crowd of students arrayed in front of him.

“Thank you all for coming,” Lockhart stated, twirling his cape elaborately as he unfastened the broach that held it together before tossing it off into a waiting pack of seventh year girls.

“Headmaster Dumbledore has given his permission for us to learn the noble art of duelling. And, as the winner of the Order of Merlin, third class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defence League and five times Winner of Witch Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award, the obvious choice to instruct you all is … me!”

Harry’d already heard more than enough. Turning, he began slipping through the crowds behind him towards the doors. Behind him, he sensed Neville and a reluctant Hermione following along.

“Now, as there are so many of you,” Lockhart continued, “I’ve enlisted the aid of Professor Snape who assures me that he knows a thing or two about duelling himself.”

Harry could imagine the sneer that had just appeared on ‘Professor Greasy-Bat’s’ face.

“But you aren’t to worry, you’ll still have your potions master after I’ve finished with him,” Lockhart laughed.

Hearing that, Harry was glad that he’d already reached the door. He wasn’t in the mood to watch a murder be performed.

“Oi, Scarhead! Where are you off to? Too scared, are we? Afraid that you’ll get shown up, perhaps?”

“Shove off, Malfoy,” Harry retorted, “you know as well as I do that we’d never learn anything from that ponce.”

“Who says I need to learn anything about duelling?” Malfoy sneered back. “I’ve already been taught the forms. I could beat you right here, right now.”

Harry smirked at the blonde git. “You’re certainly confident, aren’t you?”

“Harry, you mustn’t,” Hermione admonished, grabbing hold of his sleeve. “you know we’re not allowed to use magic in the hallways.”

“You’re not going to listen to a mudblood, are you, Scarhead?” Malfoy drawled.

“Don’t call her that!” Harry snapped, his anger rising to fever pitch instantaneously.

“I’ll call her whatever I want to call her. Especially if it’s what she is. A mudblood.”

“I told you not to call her that!” Harry snarled.

“Why? What are you going to do about it?” Malfoy smirked.

In an instant, Harry’s wand was in his hand even as with his off-hand he pushed Hermione back and out of the way.

“Oh, so you *do* want to duel, do you?” Malfoy asked. “Well, we’re supposed to bow first, but I don’t feel like it. *Tarantallegra!”*

“*Protego!”* Harry replied, sending up a quick shield to block the jinx. Then, before Malfoy could
respond, “Flipendo!”

A bright blue blast of magic shot across the intervening space between the two boys. It connected violently with Malfoy, eliciting a heavy gasp from him even as he was shoved backwards through the air before coming down hard onto his back. Harry’s eyebrows rose in surprise. Malfoy hadn’t even attempted to dodge, let alone shield, two of the first things that Remus had taught him.

Scrabbling back to his feet, Malfoy glowered. “You’ll pay for that, Potter! Serpensortia!”

An explosion of light and sound erupted from Malfoy’s wand and Harry cast a quick protego. The shield, though, proved unnecessary. Instead of a shooting a spell at him, it seemed that Malfoy had shot a large black snake at him. It landed heavily on the floor mid-way between the two combatants and it was clearly incredibly annoyed.

The head of the snake rose high, its tongue darting in and out as it tasted the air.

A mass movement to the side caught not only Harry’s attention, but also the snake’s. Both turned to see that a large crowd had gathered, obviously attracted by the lights and sounds of the two dueling second years. At the very front of the crowd, far too close for the liking of the large snake, stood Ron Weasley.

Rearing up high, the snake peered at Ron before slowly starting to slither towards him, their eyes locked together. Sensing what was about to happen, Harry took a step forward.

“§ Leave him be §”

Instantly, the snake swivelled its head to regard Harry before dropping down into a coil on the floor.

“§As you wish, Speaker§” the snake replied.

Satisfied that the snake wasn’t going to attack, Harry looked up once more at the crowd. His eyes ran over and past the dozens of shocked and frightened faces until he found one that he was looking for.

“What are you playing at, eh?” Ron snarled at Harry.

“Professor Snape? Could you send the snake back where he came from please?” Harry asked, ignoring Ron for the moment.

Slowly, his narrowed, calculating eyes not leaving Harry’s, Professor Snape drew his wand, waved it in a complicated pattern and vanished the snake.

“Twenty points for duelling in the corridor, Potter,” Snape stated. “Draco, come with me, please.”

A sharp tug on his arms alerted Harry to both Hermione and Neville holding on to opposite arms.

“Come on, Harry,” Hermione said forcefully.

With a slight nod, Harry allowed himself to be led away. The eyes of the crowd, he knew, never left him. Nor did the vicious look that Ron was giving him.

-oOoOo-

Minerva McGonagall raised her hand to knock on the ancient oak door to the Headmaster’s Office when she was interrupted.

“Come in, Minerva!” the Headmaster called.
She scowled. He did it every time. Not once had she ever managed to surprise the old man. As she reached out for the door knob, she glared at the statue of the griffin sitting in the corner. One of these days, she’d like to take her wand to it and see exactly what charms had been placed on it. She’d bet her last knut that it was the one telling Dumbledore who was at the door before they even had a chance to announce themselves.

“Ah, Minerva, what can I do for you?” Dumbledore asked as she entered the office.

He was sitting back in his chair behind his desk, his fingers steepled in front of him, that maddening eye twinkle of his working overtime. It was what she called his ‘grandfather visage’. The pose designed to make everyone feel as though he knew best and everyone else was being a naughty little person that had to make it up to him. It was a trick that she’d fallen for more times than she cared to admit.

At his gesture, she seated herself on the chair in front of his desk.

“It’s Mister Potter,” Minerva began, deciding to come straight to the point.

“And what about Mister Potter did you wish to discuss?” Dumbledore asked.

“I assume that you’ve heard what happened last night?” she asked.

Dumbledore’s eye twinkle began to work overtime. “I take it that you mean that little impromptu duel that occurred between Mister Potter and Mister Malfoy? Yes, I did hear a little something about that.”

“Then you heard how it ended?” Minerva pressed.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore replied. “Severus impressed upon me those particulars as well.”

_I’ll just bet he did_, Minerva thought before saying, “then you’re aware that our Mister Potter is a parselmouth?”

“I am.” A small smile played around Dumbledore’s lips.

Suddenly, Minerva gasped. “You knew! You knew that he could talk to snakes.”

“Indeed, I did not,” Dumbledore protested. “I don’t think anyone knew before Mister Potter began speaking to the snake that young Mister Malfoy conjured.”

Minerva’s eyes narrowed. “What makes me think that you’re not surprised?”

“Now, that is a question that I cannot answer, Minerva,” Dumbledore replied.

Once, that sort of answer would be dismissed by her. Not this time, though. She’d just regained Mister Potter’s trust. A trust that had first been broken by her blind faith in the man before her. She’d had to learn the hard way that everything that Dumbledore said and did had to be questioned and looked at twice or even a third time.

“Did you know that Mister Potter was a parselmouth?” Minerva asked, hoping that the direct question might actually produce a direct answer.

Dumbledore regarded her for a long time over the top of his half-moon glasses before the briefest of sighs escaped him. “I had my suspicions.”

“But, Albus, how could that be? No Potter has ever been a parselmouth!” she gasped.
“I have my suspicions, Minerva,” here he held up a hand to prevent her asking any questions. “But that’s all they are – suspicions. And until I can confirm them, I’d prefer to keep them to myself.”

Minerva frowned at that but filed it away for later thought.

“I assume that you’re aware that the boy’s been shunned and ridiculed all day today for having that particular ability?” Minerva questioned.

Dumbledore inclined his head. “Indeed. In fact, I would have been surprised if it had been otherwise.”

And now it came to the crux of why she was there. “So what are you going to do about it, Albus? We can’t have a student being bullied like that.”

“I’m afraid that there’s little that we can do,” Dumbledore replied. “Mister Potter will have to learn to weather the behaviour of his peers.”

“Weather the behaviour …!” Minerva repeated. She could feel the shock from his statement and the anger that was starting to build behind it. “Albus, it’s our job to ensure that every student can learn in a safe, supportive environment! We can’t simply allow bullying to occur.”

“Alas, I’m afraid we may have to. The Christmas holidays are just around the corner. I’m sure the students will forget this during their time away from the Castle,” Dumbledore stated.

“No, Albus! No, they will not! Harry Potter being able to speak parseltongue will not simply be forgotten in a week or even a month. It’s our job to stop this bullying now before it gets out of hand!” she hissed, slapping her hand on his desk to emphasise her point.

For the longest time, Dumbledore stared curiously at her, his head slightly to one side. Thankfully, that damnable twinkle had finally disappeared.

“And what, may I ask, do you believe that we should do about this situation?” he finally asked.

“At the very least, you, as Headmaster, should decry the behaviour of the students,” she declared, having come to this conclusion long before she walked into the room. “As Headmaster, you should give a lecture to the student body telling them that having an ability like parseltongue does not inherently make someone ‘dark’. Tell them that it’s something that some people are born with, that it’s a special gift, just like being a metamorphmagus is a special gift.

“If you allow the students to sink into stereotyping based on an ability, then you support the very idea that having that ability makes someone ‘dark’. Or ‘light’ for that matter. And if you don’t, then the next we’ll hear is the accusation that Harry Potter is the Heir of Slytherin or the next the up and coming Dark Lord.

“And heaven help us if, after being abused the way he was for those ten years with those people and having the magical world turn on him, Harry Potter decides that it’s just easier to go with the flow and become what everyone expects him to be: the next Dark Lord!”

She watched Dumbledore carefully even as her chest heaved as she struggled to calm down. She could see his thoughts whirling and all she could do was hope. Hope that she had managed to get through to him.

“Very well, Minerva,” he finally said. “I shall speak to the students at breakfast tomorrow.”

Minerva gave a satisfied nod of her head.
“Make sure that you do, Albus. Because if you don’t, then I will!” she promised.

-oOoOo-

Harry hurried through the deserted passageway, keen to reach the next set of stairs that would eventually take him up towards the Gryffindor common room. He’d skipped dinner but over the years of missing countless meals, that was really no hardship, especially when the alternative was to have the whole school looking at you, staring at you and whispering about you.

Even after that less than inspiring talk that Professor Dumbledore had given at breakfast the day before, the attitudes of those he encountered hadn’t changed. He was still feared. Droves of people shied away or ducked into classrooms at his approach. He was sure that he’d even seen one Hufflepuff throw himself through a hidden doorway behind a tapestry and tumble down the stairs that morning.

If anyone was going to get a positive out of the whole parselmouth thing, then it seemed that it was going to be Professor Lockhart. The night after the ‘incident’, the Defence Against the Dark Arts tutorial with Remus had been nearly deserted. Only Hermione, Neville, Lil Moon and Sally-Anne had come along. When Harry had finally admitted to Remus what had happened, he’d seen the shock and momentary fear on the older man’s face, only to be instantly replaced by something that Harry could only name as understanding.

Shaking the morose thoughts away, Harry concentrated on what he was doing. He was cutting it pretty fine for getting back into the Tower before curfew.

“Blood … Fresh blood … Meat … So close … Need to Kill …”

Harry froze. Once again he was hearing that strange voice in the walls. Spinning around, he searched for where it was coming from.

“Need to rip … Tear … Kill …”

The voice sent goosebumps up his spine and he was glad that it was fading away, back towards where he’d come from. But there was definitely something familiar about it. It was like a voice that he’d heard very recently. Shivering with disgust, Harry decided to keep moving.

Ducking out from a shortcut that ended behind a suit of armour, Harry looked down the corridor only to find himself frowning.

Right at the very end underneath the closed windows, was the strangest tableau that he’d ever seen. Three students were unmoving right against the far wall. Two stood over the third who was frozen on her knees. As all were currently facing away from him, Harry found himself stepping lighter in an attempt to sneak past.

But something was nagging at him. Something definitely felt wrong about the scene. Pausing, he studied the three. And then he saw their reflection in the windows.

Crabbe and Goyle were the two standing. Both had their wands trained on the back of the head of the girl, who Harry now recognised as being Lil. Lil’s hands were up, covering her mouth and it looked like she was crying. But the strangest thing was that all three were staring into the window, identical looks of horror on their face.

A noise behind him spun Harry around.

“Ooh, it’s Potty wee Potter,” Peeves the poltergeist cackled. “What’s Potty doing out so close to
curfew, Peevesie wonders.”

And then Peeves spun completely the right way up before zooming at the three frozen second years.

“ATTACK! ATTACK IN THE FIFTH FLOOR CORRIDOR!” Peeves bellowed.
“ATTACK! ATTACK IN THE FIFTH FLOOR CORRIDOR!” Peeves bellowed.

Harry panicked, but before he could move, Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, along with the Bloody Baron and Nearly Headless Nick appeared.

“What’s happened?” Professor McGonagall blurted, her eyes constantly flicking between Harry and the three frozen figures.

“I don’t know, Professor. I just found them like that,” Harry replied quickly.

“They’re petrified,” Professor Flitwick announced from where he stood between the three waving his wand over each one. “Looks identical to what happened with Argus and Mrs Norris.”

With a sigh and a wave of her wand, Professor McGonagall produced a brilliant silver cat that immediately raced off down the corridor.

“Poppy will be here momentarily,” Professor McGonagall announced.

“It looks to me as though whatever it was that happened, it interrupted Mister Crabbe and Mister Goyle in the midst of some misdeed,” Professor Flitwich commented.

“Filius if you could handle things here? Mister Potter, you’d better come with me,” Professor McGonagall stated.

With a sigh, Harry trooped after his Head of House.

Professor McGonagall set a swift pace as he was led along corridors, down staircases and then along even more corridors. Finally, a pair of gargoyles came into sight and she finally slowed down.

“Lemon drops,” Professor McGonagall said.

Instantly, the two gargoyles leapt to either side, allowing a hidden door in the wall to be revealed. This, too, opened by itself to reveal a set of circular stairs leading upwards. Following the professor, Harry stepped through the doors and prepared himself for another climb. However, the instant that his feet touched the stairs, he felt a jerk below him causing him to reach out to the hand rail to steady himself.

The two of them rode the circular stairs upwards in silence to a landing in front of another door, this one guarded by a huge stone griffin. His eyebrows rose as he noticed Professor McGonagall scowl at the griffin before raising her hand to knock on the door.

A call of, “come in, Minerva,” met their ears a fraction of a second before the professor could knock and Harry heard a sigh of exasperation escape the witch in front of him.

The room that he found himself being led into was a huge office. There were bookshelves galore, shelves full of trinket of the most bizarre design simply begging to the examined, an owl perch and a large, rich, looking desk piled high with even more books and stacks of parchment.

The occupant seated behind the desk, though, caused Harry’s face to darken and it was all he could do to suppress his sudden urge to growl. That or race forward and throttle the old man before him.

All term Harry had studiously avoided being anywhere near Dumbledore. It was because of him that
he’d been placed with the Dursleys. He was the reason that he’d had to suffer ten years of beatings, ten years of hoping for the meanest table scraps, ten years of doing the never-ending cooking, cleaning, gardening and whatever it took to appease the Dursleys. And he was the one who failed in his promise to do something about it last summer.

“Headmaster Dumbledore, I’m afraid that there has been another attack,” Professor McGonagall announced.

Dumbledore dropped the quill that he’d been using onto his desk as he half-rose in his chair before retaking his seat.

“The details, if you would, Minerva,” Dumbledore asked.

“It seems that Mister Goyle, Mister Crabbe and Miss Moon have been petrified at the end of the fifth floor corridor, northern end. It appears that Mister Goyle and Mister Crabbe were in the midst of the act of bullying Miss Moon when the three were … interrupted,” Professor McGonagall stated concisely. “I was alerted to the situation by Peeves.”

“And Mister Potter, what is your part in all of this?” Dumbledore asked, his piercing blue eyes trained on his own emerald ones.

“Nothing, Professor, I swear! I just found them like that,” Harry protested.

“You are, of course, to be believed,” Dumbledore stated after another minute of intense staring. “No second year would have the ability to petrify another. You may return to Gryffindor Tower.”

As Harry made to turn, he felt a hand land on his shoulder, holding him in place.

“Just a minute, Mister Potter,” Professor McGonagall said. “You’d best stay. I suspect the aurors will want to interview you.”

“No need …!” She said, shock and anger clear to hear. “Three students have been attacked. It is nothing less than our duty to inform the DMLE so that we can get to the bottom of this!” Suddenly, her eyes narrowed as her glare deepened. “Albus, tell me you informed the DMLE about the attack on Mister Filch and Mrs Norris.”

When no reply was forthcoming, Professor McGonagall strode across to the fireplace, stuck her hand into a pot on the mantle and prepared to some powder into the floo.

“Minerva,” Dumbledore began, warning clear in his voice.

But Professor McGonagall ignored the old man and, instead, grabbed the entire pot of powder in her other hand before getting down on her knees in front of the fire-place. Harry watched as she threw the handful of powder in, turning the flames a sparkling emerald green before she stuck her head into the flames. A couple of minutes later and her head pulled back, allowing the flames to retake their usual colours.

Within moments, though, Professor McGonagall had thrown another handful of powder into the flames and was once again making a floo call. After the fourth time, she seemed to pause before
scowling and muttering under her breath before throwing even more powder at the fireplace, this time rather viciously, to make a fifth and final floo call.

By the time that she’d finished, she’d been kneeling on the floor for close to a quarter of an hour. Seeing her reaching out to brace against the wall and the grimace that appeared on her face as she slowly began to rise to her feet, Harry rushed across to help the elderly witch up.

“Thank you, Mister Potter,” she said, a small smile appearing momentarily on her face. “I suggest that you alert Mister Elmworthy, Albus, we’re going to be having some guests arriving at the gate any time now.”

Dumbledore’s face seemed to be frozen as he glared at Professor McGonagall and Harry knew that if it wasn’t for his presence, then some harsh words would be being exchanged right then between the two adults. Instead, Dumbledore withdrew his wand and produced a brilliant silver phoenix that promptly flew out through the window.

The wait over the next quarter of an hour was almost unbearable for Harry. He’d been directed to sit in a hard-backed wooden chair but it was nowhere near as tough to endure as the daggers that Dumbledore and McGonagall were shooting at each other. Glancing around his eyes came to rest on the copy of the *Daily Prophet* on the small table before him and he briefly considered reading through it to give him something to do.

Finally, a loud booming knock came from the door at the same instant that Dumbledore announced, “Come in, Mister Elmworthy.”

“You’ve got some visitors,” the groundskeeper announced.

“Thank you, Darius,” Dumbledore replied.

Harry’s head whipped back to the Headmaster. His voice was once more that light, grandfatherly-type of voice that Harry’d come to expect from the old man. Gone was the anger and annoyance that he’d been exuding for the last half hour.

As Harry turned back, it was to see Madam Bones accompanied by a pair of red-robed aurors, two thick, heavyset men and a young-looking couple entering the room. Just as Harry thought that that was everyone, a walking stick preceded a tall, arrogant-looking blonde man that he’d seen once before.

“Thank you all for coming,” Headmaster Dumbledore announced, rising to shake the hands of the newcomers. “It seems that an unfortunate event has befallen us this evening. I assure you that everyone involved is perfectly alright.”

At this, Professor McGonagall gave an undignified sniff.

“It would seem,” Dumbledore continued, “that there has been an incident with three children that has left them petrified.”

“That doesn’t sound ‘perfectly alright’ to me, Dumbledore,” Madam Bones declared.

“Perhaps not, Amelia, however I assure you that it is only a temporary condition. Madam Sprout is in the process of growing the needed mandrakes to restore them all to full health,” Dumbledore countered.

“I take it one of the children is our Lil?” the tall, dark haired man asked as his wife near collapsed into his side.
“I’m afraid so,” Dumbledore replied. “Miss Moon was one of those involved, along with Mister Crabbe and Mister Goyle.”

“Mister Crabbe, Mister Goyle, Mister and Mrs Moon, if you’d care to come with me, I’ll take you to your children,” Professor McGonagall stated kindly.

The remaining adults waited for the stricken parents to leave before continuing their discussion. It was as he was watching Professor McGonagall leave that Harry noticed a small movement around the feet of Mister Malfoy.

Out of the shadows of Malfoy’s cloak came a creature that Harry knew well. Now that Harry could see Dobby the House Elf properly and not shrouded in darkness as he was in the hospital wing, he looked even worse that Harry’d realised.

His pillow case clothing was supposed to be white. In reality, it was a dirty brown with streaks of black and blotches of oil and food stains peppering it. Covering most of his body were dirty bandages. Each finger had one, as well as both of his long bat-like ears. A large one was swathed around his head and one ran the length of his left arm. Peeking out from the tatters of his pillowcase, was a final bandage around his right foot.

Dobby had yet to notice that Harry was in the room with him. The small elf’s entire focus was on the dirty cloth in his hand and Malfoy’s shoes which he was attempting to polish.

As the space in the office cleared, Malfoy strode forward, incidentally kicking Dobby out of the way before swinging his cane like a club to bat the elf into a backwards tumble, leaving Dobby sprawled on the floor for a second before he scrambled back to his feet to chase after the dirty shoes that he was trying to polish.

“No, Albus, what has been going on here?” Madam Bones asked.

A roaring in his ears prevented Harry from hearing the conversation going on around him. Image after image flashed through his mind, blocking out all else.

Uncle Vernon’s raised hand swinging to knock him flying into a wall. The purple, enraged face of Uncle Vernon screaming at him, spittle flying. A frying pan cracking into the side of his head when he spilled a plateful of bacon when he was six. Dudley’s fist punching endlessly into his face and stomach, quickly followed by boots at his ribs after he’d fallen to the floor. Hands tied to a chair as his uncle whipped his belt across his back over and over and over until he fell into blessed unconsciousness. Being flung repeatedly into his cupboard, the door slamming shut behind him, hisses of threats sent through the tiny grate.

Every nasty, horrifying thing that had ever been done to him was relived as he continued to stare at the poor house elf before him. And then, more recent memories invaded. Bars on his window. Locks on his door. A tiny cat-flap in his door. And then Harry throwing a chair against the wall, creating that sliver of hope.

His anger turning to glee as he repeated smashed at the wall to win his freedom. Cutting Hedwig free from her cage. Ripping off the lock to the cupboard under the stairs. Mounting his broom to fly from away from Privet Drive for the very last time.

And then, even more recent, Dobby’s quiet, “Dobby is still treated like vermin.” Followed by Mick and Hermione’s conversation.

“The House Elf is bound to serve their master, no matter what. If the elf is being abused, they can’t
“That’s barbaric!” Hermione protested. “Do you mean that there’s no way for the bond to be broken?”

“Sure there is, just give the House Elf clothes and they’ll be set free.”

“Harry? Harry!”

Giving himself a little shake, Harry raised his head to find Madam Bones standing in front of him, looking quite concerned.

“I’m sorry, what was that, Madam Bones?” he asked.

“Harry, I’d like you to tell us what happened this evening,” Madam Bones instructed.

Looking around at each of those still in the room, he began almost automatically, even as the back of his mind continued working on a completely different problem.

“I was on my way back to Gryffindor Tower. It was getting close to curfew, so I was hurrying, you know? I came out of one of the passageways on the fifth floor, the one behind the suit of armour and I saw … them … there. They were all frozen in place, although I didn’t realise it at first because they had their backs to me.”

“Could you describe how they were grouped?” Madam Bones asked.

Absently, Harry picked up the copy of the *Daily Prophet* that lay on the small table to the side of him and began twisting it in his hands as he continued to speak. “Crabbe and Goyle were standing. They had their wands pointed at Lil. She was on her knees in front of them, facing away from them. I saw that Lil’s hands were over her mouth and it looked like she’d been crying.”

Madam Bones’ face darkened. “Go on, Harry.”

“When I got a little closer, I could see them all in the reflection of the window. They looked like they were all looking either straight at me or maybe at something past me. That’s when Peeves arrived. He realised what had happened and yelled and that’s when Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick and the ghosts came running.”

“Thank you, Harry,” she said, giving his shoulder a quick pat.

Rounding on Dumbledore, Madam Bones continued her questioning.

“And you have no idea what did this?” she asked.

“None, I’m afraid,” Dumbledore replied.

“And nothing like this has ever happened before?” she asked.

As they talked, Harry surreptitiously bent down as if to scratch his leg.

“Dumbledore!” Madam Bones snapped. “Answer the question!”

“There was an incident on Halloween,” Dumbledore finally admitted, “that ended with Mister Filch and his familiar, Mrs Norris, also being petrified.”

“Why is this the first that I’m hearing about it?” Madam Bones exploded.
“The Board of Governors will be hearing of this Dumbledore, and I can assure you that they will take a very dim view of these incidents,” Mister Malfoy drawled. “Be prepared to face some tough questions and some harsh penalties.”

“I saw it as an internal matter that would resolve itself once we could revive Argus,” Dumbledore replied.

With her back to him, Harry couldn’t see it, but he imagined Madam Bones’ eyes narrowing. “And when will you be able to revive those affected?”

“I believe that the mandrakes will be ready for cultivation by the middle of May,” Dumbledore replied.

“That’s still five months away!” Madam Bones yelled. “You weren’t going to do anything for another five months? This is a school, for Merlin’s sake! You can’t have this danger hanging over the heads of hundreds of school children for the next five months! Believe me, Dumbledore, if the Hogarts Express wasn’t due to arrive in the morning to take the students’ home for break, I’d be demanding it right now. As it is, we’ll have to arrange for alternative accommodation for those that are staying while we shut this school down and scour it from top to bottom to find out what’s going on.”

“The Board of Governors will fully support your decision, Madam Bones,” Mister Malfoy stated.

As she turned to nod to the man, her eye caught Harry’s. “Mister Potter, I believe that you’re free to return to Gryffindor Tower. Auror Phillips will escort you.”

With a nod of thanks, Harry hopped up. Half way to the door, he suddenly stopped, looked down at the paper that was still in his hands and backed up. Wordlessly, he handed it to Mister Malfoy.

The blonde man sneered down at first him and then it before throwing it aside. Harry watched, his eyes sparkling as the paper landed in the lap of Dobby who, once again, had been knocked over when Malfoy had turned around. Harry stared at the paper, or, more specifically, at the slither of cloth sticking out from the middle of it.

Dobby’s big green eyes widened as he looked from his lap to his master to Harry, back to his lap, to Harry once again and then back to his lap.

Slowly, almost reverently, Dobby opened the paper, only to have one of Harry’s white socks with the red and gold piping of Gryffindor around its top, fall into his lap.

“Master … Master has given Dobby … a sock,” he murmured in awe.


“Master has given Dobby a sock,” Dobby repeated, this time holding the item up for inspection. “Dobby is free!”

“What are you yammering on about?” he asked, before noticing what it was that Dobby was holding. “How did you …? You!” he snarled, rounding on Harry, “you cost me my elf! I’ll have you, boy!”

As Malfoy advanced, he whipped his wand out of the top of his cane and pointed it viciously at Harry. For his part, Harry stood his ground, shaking so hard that he didn’t think that he actually could move.
“Mister Malfoy!” Madam Bones snapped. “Put your wand away this instant!”

“I don’t like bullies,” Harry stated quietly. His firm voice seemed to echo around the room. “Especially bullies who beat others. I’ve had enough of that done to me to know what it feels like. If you want, I’ll pay for Dobby, but I’m glad he’s free. Free so that you can’t hurt him anymore.”

“Rest assured, boy, you will pay!” Malfoy promised.

“And I shall arbitrate the matter,” Madam Bones cut in. “But not now and not tonight. Right now, we have a school-wide situation to deal with. Auror Phillips, please ensure that Mister Potter arrives safely at Gryffindor Tower.”

With a small pop Dobby disappeared from the office as Harry was quickly ushered out of Dumbledore’s office, a fact that he was quite glad about.

As they were moving down the spiral staircase, the red-robed auror leant over towards Harry.

“Gutsy move, kid,” he said quietly, awe clear in his voice. “Gutsy move.”
The trip back to London on the Hogwarts Express was pure torture for Harry. Sure, he had Neville and Hermione sitting with him, but that was poor comfort when he considered the looks that he was given as people walked past their compartment.

The news about the triple attack was all over the school even before breakfast that morning. The fact that the castle was crawling with aurors, most assigned to escorting people from the common rooms to the Great Hall and back, was a dead giveaway that something terrible had happened. And then there were the indisputable facts.

1. Harry was found at the scene of the crime.
2. Two of the victims, Crabbe and Goyle, had obviously been in the act of bullying the third, Lil, a known friend of Harry’s. And everyone knew Harry’s dislike of bullies.
3. Two of the victims were Slytherin. Enough said on that one when it came to Harry vs. the House of the Snakes.
4. Everyone knew that Harry could speak parseltongue. This also meant that everyone also knew that Harry was on the verge of becoming the next Dark Lord. And Dark Lord’s always knew lots of dark spells, spells that were sure to be able to do terrible things to people. Like petrify them.

The only fact that might have caused people to pause was the fact that Lil had been one of the ones petrified. But then, a simple shrug and a careless, “he’s still young and he’s still learning his dark spells. She was probably just caught in the backlash,” took care of that minor detail.

Hermione and Neville had tried getting Harry to talk about it. They’d tried to bolster his feelings. They’d tried to joke with him and muck around. It all failed. In the end, they simply gave up and allowed him to sit looking out of the window.

When the great red steam train finally pulled up at King’s Cross Station, Harry was the first off the train. With quick, purposeful strides, he weaved his way through the crowd to the barrier between Platform Nine and Three Quarters and the muggle world. At the nod from the wizard in charge, Harry stepped through.

“Harry!” a strong, clear voice called.

Looking around, Harry looked to see who was calling his name. If it hadn’t been for the fact that Remus was standing right beside him, there was no way that Harry would have recognised his godfather. Obviously the months that he’d spent in Saint Mungo’s had done Sirius a world of good.

Gone was the stooped shoulders and the thin, emancipated look. In its place stood a man who looked strong and proud. The long, straggly beard and hair had also been tamed until it was clean and shiny, although the small goatee that he’d left gave him a roguish sort of air. And lastly, the rags that he’d been wearing to his trial had been replaced by a black, muggle three-piece suit. His undershirt was a rich purple and gold buttons and there was a chain that looked like it belonged to a fob watch crossed on his stomach.

As Harry’s face broke into its first smile that day, he quick-stepped across to the two men. Without thinking, Harry flung his arms around Sirius. Sirius hugged him back, before ruffling his hair and holding him out at arm’s length.

“Let me look at you, Pup,” Sirius said, the tears in his eyes threatening to overflow.
“It’s good to see you, Sirius,” Harry stated, “you look good.”

“Thanks, Pup, so do you,” Sirius replied. “I feel good, too. Mind you, I’d want to after all the poking and prodding and potions that I’ve had to endure.”

“Yes, he actually looks like a Lord these days,” Remus stated blandly.

“Don’t you start, Moony,” Sirius mock growled.

“Hey, Remus,” Harry said, turning to the thin man.

“It’s good to see you, Harry,” Remus replied.

Their handshake quickly morphed into a hug just as powerful as the one that Sirius had just given him.

“Come on, you two, let’s get out of here before the crowds start arriving through the barrier,” said Sirius. “Where’s your trunk, Harry?”

In answer, Harry simply patted his pocket. With a nod from Sirius, the three of them quickly made their way outside where Sirius hailed a cab.

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Stepping out of the cab, Harry looked around. He knew that Sirius and Remus lived at the manor of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black. But he couldn’t see how this particular part of London could be anywhere near it.

The small park that they were standing in was overgrown and unkempt. The houses along Grimmauld Place were all old and dilapidated, every one in obvious need of major repair. None of the few cars that drove along the street before them were new or even looked to have been new last decade.

“Here you go, Pup, read this,” Sirius instructed, handing him a crumpled slip of paper.

The House of the Ancient and Noble House of Black can be found at 12 Grimmauld Place.

Confused, Harry looked up into his godfather’s face.

“Now, just think about what you read,” Sirius instructed before gesturing to the houses across the street.

Puzzled, Harry did as he was told. Instantly, house number eleven and house number thirteen began to shudder. Suddenly, a slither of a new house appeared. This one began to expand, pushing the ones to either side of it out of the way. By the time that it was finished, an old house, not unlike its brethren, stood before them. It was three stories tall, painted a faded black and decorated with dull silver trimmings.

At Sirius’ nod, Harry, followed by Remus, crossed the street, entered the gate and ascended the stairs. Instead of a door handle, the door was adorned with a silver knocker in the shape of a snake. At Sirius’ wand touch, the door swung open.

“Welcome home, Harry!” Sirius said with a flourish.

Harry looked around. The short entrance hall was dimly lit by a dusty, cobwebbed chandelier. The walls were painted a colour so dark that it looked to be pretending to be black. Underfoot, the
floorboards were in a severe need of a good polishing. Or even three. To one side stood an umbrella stand that Harry hoped was made from a replica of a troll’s foot and not actually the real thing.

“It’s a bit … dark, isn’t it?” he commented hesitantly.

Sirius barked in laughter even as behind him, Remus snickered.

“Well of course it is, Harry. What’d you expect? This is the House of Black! Not to mention that it’s been abandoned for the last ten years or so and the house elf up and died on us during that time,” Sirius explained.

“We’ve been working hard just to get enough parts of the house cleaned and inhabitable in time for Christmas,” Remus put in. “There’s quite a few rooms, not to mention entire floors, that aren’t safe to go into as yet.”

Harry looked nervously between the two men. “Are you sure it’s okay to have Christmas here?”

“’Course it is,” Sirius boomed.

“FILTHY BLOOD TRAITOR! HALF-BREED! SCUM OF MY LOINS! BEGONE I TELL YOU!” a thunderous voice bellowed.

“What in the world …” Harry began, covering his ears at the noise.

“Don’t mind her,” Sirius called, “that’s just my mum.”

“Your Mum?” Harry asked.

With a wave, Sirius led them down the short entryway to a large, life-size painting of a deranged looking woman.

“My mum,” Sirius introduced. “She goes on like this whenever she wakes up. Can’t get her off the wall, though. Merlin knows we’ve tried.”

Harry looked at the painting in question, even as he kept his ears covered to block out the vile things that Mrs Black was continuing to rain down upon the three of them. No, this was not something that any sane person would want in their home.

“Sirius,” Harry frowned. “What’s on the other side of this wall?”

“A small sitting room. Why do you ask?” he replied.

“Do you have any particular attachment to the room?” Harry asked.

“Can’t say that I do,” a bewildered Sirius replied.

“In that case …” Harry began as he whipped out his wand. “Diffindo!”

Using the second year cutting curse that he’d recently been taught, Harry slashed the wall to the left side of the painting. It took a second incantation for him to make a cut deep enough to reach all the way through the wall. By that time, both Sirius and Remus had laughed and brandished their own wands. Within a minute the entire section of wall that the painting was attached to fell forward to smash into the floor at their feet.

“How about a new doorway into the sitting room?” Harry asked.
“Pup, you are an absolute genius!” Sirius laughed, giving the boy a one-armed hug.

“Give me a hand, Sirius. We’ll take her down to the basement for the next firing session,” said Remus.

With a nod, the two of them picked up the painting, wall and all, and set off, leaving Harry to trot along behind.

“There’s a wizard-grade incinerator down in the basement,” Remus explained. “It runs off of and contains the fiendfyre curse. That’ll destroy anything. And believe me, there’s a lot of stuff in this house that’s needed to be destroyed.”

“The whole lot of my stinking family, well, almost all of them,” Sirius amended, “have always been obsessed with the dark arts. Most of the stuff’s probably worth a small fortune, but it’s only money and I’d rather see the stuff destroyed than out there on the streets doing whatever dark stuff it was designed for.”

While they were talking, Harry was led deeper into the house. A short half-flight of stairs opened into an enormous kitchen. Everything in it looked old and out of date, from the colour scheme (a dark chocolate) to the wood stove and fireplace. In the centre of the room stood an enormous table that looked sturdy enough to survive having the house fall on top of it. To either side, long wooden benches, not unlike Hogwarts house tables, provided the seating.

After passing through the kitchen, where Harry was also able to take a quick peek into the walk in pantry, Sirius and Remus led him through another door. This topped onto another staircase. Ignoring for the moment that he was descending into complete darkness, Harry followed along.

Once Sirius had given a lazy flick of his wand to light the torches around the room, Harry found a room that must have equalled the entire floor above in its vastness. Piled up to one side were mountains of books, trinkets, golden shapes, silver doodads, items of clothes and even extra pictures, like the one of Mrs Black that the two men simply tossed aside.

“And all this stuff is full of dark magic?” Harry asked, flabbergasted at the sight of it all.

“Yep,” Sirius replied. “And the worst bit is that we’ve only been through the bottom two levels. There’s still another two floors to go.”

Squatting down for a closer look, Harry roved his eyes over it all. It was hard to imagine, but if Sirius and Remus said that it was all dark … Suddenly, Harry found his eyes locked onto a particularly exquisite-looking dagger. It was silver with a curved handle and a pommel inlaid with black filigree. Slowly, reverently, he reached out his hand.

A hand locked onto his wrist, freezing it in place and Harry blinked.

“You don’t want to do that, Harry,” Remus warned.

Seeing the boy nod, he continued. “there’s all kinds of compulsion charms in this lot. It’s best not to get too close.”

A sudden clatter behind him drew his attention and Harry quickly stood and spun around. Sirius, he saw, was standing beside an enormous boiler. A door in its side was open and Sirius was using a shovel of all things to load the boiler with cursed treasure. Stepping closer, he watched as the shovel dug into the closest pile before dumping it into the boiler.

Inside, he saw a couple of sets of ancient robes, goblets and rings. A large golden pendant locket the
size of an egg with an elaborate ‘S’ design on its face was quickly buried under the next load.

After another three shovelfuls, Sirius slammed the door shut, leant the shovel against the wall and withdrew his wand. At the very top of the boiler was a small slot, not unlike the grill that was in the door to his cupboard back at Privet Drive. Sirius stuck his wand in the slot and muttered something that Harry was sure that he didn’t want to know.

Instantly a great *whoosh* erupted inside the boiler.

“Well, that’s another lot,” Sirius said, wiping his brow, “Figured we might as well since we were down here.”

“Will it take long to burn?” Harry asked.

“Nah, fiendfyre burns fast. Five minutes and it’ll be out. There won’t even be any ash left,” Sirius replied.

“How about we head back upstairs,” Remus suggested. “I’m sure Harry’s hungry after the trip down from Scotland.”

With nods all round, the three made their way upstairs to the kitchen. Butterbeers were procured from the cold box and the notion of dinner was discussed.

Harry was amused to watch as his godfather and ‘uncle’ attempted to fix something to eat. Sirius was all for creating a masterpiece; Remus for something that he actually thought that they could prepare. He had the impression that this wasn’t the first or even the hundredth time that the pair had had the same argument.

In the end, after Sirius had made a disgustingly burnt offering that Remus and Harry agreed not even a dog would eat, a loaf of bread, some cold meats and cheese was produced.

As Harry put together a sandwich, he felt someone looking at him. Looking up, he found Remus’ pale grey eyes on him, his head cocked slightly to one side. At Harry’s raised eyebrow, his tutor gave a sigh and placed his butterbeer bottle carefully on the table.

“I must say that I’m surprised, Harry,” he said. “In all the letters that we exchanged, not to mention a term’s worth of seeing each other twice a week, you never once asked why I hadn’t visited you over the last eleven years.”

“I figured you had your reasons, Remus and that you’d tell me when you were ready,” Harry shrugged.

“I don’t know if I’m ready, but you deserve to know,” he replied, “especially if we’re going to be spending Christmas, not to mention the next couple of weeks, together.”

“You don’t have to, Remus,” Harry reassured him.

“No, no I do,” Remus sighed and, after a nod of encouragement from Sirius, he launched into his story. “I guess it all starts when I was a boy myself. My father had made a business deal that went bad. In retaliation, a friend of the … other party … came to collect on the debt. My parents weren’t rich and couldn’t pay what was asked, so in payment, I was … attacked. Do you know much about werewolves?”

Harry started at the unexpected question. “They’re real? I thought that they were just a muggle fantasy story.”
“Oh, no, they’re real alright,” Remus replied bitterly. “It was a werewolf that attacked me and I was … bitten.”

Harry could feel his palms instantly become slick with sweat, his heart sped up to the speed of freight train and he panicked. But in amongst all of that, a small voice was screaming at him from the very back of his mind, it’s Remus! Dad’s friend. Your Defence tutor. You know him! You know he’d never hurt you!

Very deliberately, Harry looked Remus in the eye. “What does that mean exactly?”

“HA! Told you, Remus, didn’t I?” Sirius exploded. “He’s James and Lily’s son, alright!”

After a scowl at his childhood friend, Remus faced him once more. “It means that one night a month, I … transform … into the wolf. Nowadays it’s not as bad. There’s a potion that I can take, wolfsbane, that means that I keep my mind and am able to simply curl up into a ball on a mat in my cell and sleep the change away.”

“It’s his furry little problem,” Sirius announced, before taking a chug of his butterbeer.

“So you thought that you were too dangerous to visit me?” Harry concluded.

“I am dangerous, Harry, never doubt that. Only the wolfsbane and my cell keep everyone else safe,” Remus insisted emphatically.

“Now that’s not true, Moony,” Sirius protested. “Prongs and I never had a problem with you.”

“A stag and a grim are completely different from a young boy!” Remus snapped.

“Is that why you and my dad became animagi?” Harry asked Sirius.

“Got it in one, Pup,” Sirius beamed. “Your dad and I were such large creatures that we could easily look after Moony here when he transformed.”

“Leaving aside the stupidity of our youth,” Remus said with a wave of his hand, “that’s not the main reason for this conversation. The wolf is a big part of my psyche. And when everything happened that Halloween, I couldn’t cope. My … pack, for want of a better word, was decimated that night. Your mum and dad were killed. As was Peter a couple of days later. I thought that Sirius here was responsible for all of it and I was left alone. I guess I simply snapped.

“I knew that you’d been orphaned, Harry, but I assumed that there would be plenty of other people to look after you, so I took off. I disappeared into the mountains and hid myself away where I thought that I could never be hurt again. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to see you, I simply didn’t think that I’d be able to handle the pain and memories that seeing you was sure to bring.

“And then one day out of the blue, a beautiful snowy owl arrived with the most amazing letter and I knew that it was time to re-join the land of the living. The tutoring job that you’ve given me is the first job that I’ve had since that Halloween.

“You brought me hope, Harry and you gave me back my brother. There’s no way that I can ever repay you for that. I’m sorry that I wasn’t there for you for all those years, but you better believe that I’ll be there for you from now on.”

“That goes double for me, Pup,” Sirius stated.

With tears nearly blinding him, Harry stumbled from his seat, rounded the table and wrapped his
honorary uncle in a hug. It wasn’t long before he felt his godfather’s arms around him as well.
Chapter 27

When Harry awoke the following morning, it took him a few moments to remember where he was. With a smile, he remembered: he was at Sirius’, in the room that had been designated ‘Harry’s’.

Reaching out to the side table, he put his glasses on before hopping out of bed to pad across to the private bathroom that was attached to his room. By the time he’d come back out, showered, dressed and most importantly, awake, Harry was ready to face the day. Realising that it was still early, he had a look around his room.

At the moment, it was mostly barren. The old four-poster was in serious need of some fresh drapes. The dresser and side table had potential, once the muck and grime of past decades had been cleaned away. And that was it. Sirius and Remus had cleaned the room out and left it as, “a blank canvas, Pup. Yours to do with as you like. Think about it and let me know. Whatever furniture you want, we’ll get. Pick a colour for the walls. If you want carpet or just a rug, we’ll get that too.”

As Harry’s eyes swept the room, he altered it in his mind. A pair of tall bookshelves over there to either side of the window. A desk there. Maybe a small couch against that wall. The room was large and had plenty of potential. And an opportunity like this, a chance at not just his very own room but one that he could decorate himself, was not to be squandered. Or rushed into. He wanted it to be perfect.

- oOoOo -

“Morning, Pup, how’d you sleep,” a cheery Sirius asked.

Harry smiled at his godfather sitting at the big kitchen table, a mug of coffee in one hand, his paper in the other.

“Really good, thanks, Sirius. You?” he replied.

“Like a baby. Help yourself to whatever you want for breakfast, there’s plenty of food around.”

After looking through the cold box and the pantry, Harry had the urge to show the adults what real cooking was all about. Especially after last night’s debacle. And besides, cooking was something that he really did enjoy doing and wasn’t something that he’d had the chance to do for a while.

Pulling out a frying pan, a half dozen eggs, a pack of bacon and some sausages, he set to work. While the meat was frying, he grabbed out a mixing bowl and began working on some batter for the pancakes that he planned.

“Please tell me you’re not trying to cook again, Padfoot,” Remus pleaded as he entered the kitchen.

“Nope and I don’t think I’ll be attempting that again while Harry’s here. By the smell of things, we’ve just found our new chef,” Sirius replied.

Harry grinned to himself as he continued working. Cooking for someone who was actually going to appreciate his efforts felt wonderful. Before too long, three plates of steaming breakfast were placed on the table. With great smacking of lips, Sirius in particular, dug in.

“This has got to be the best food I’ve eaten in a dozen years,” he complimented.

“I’d have to agree with that,” Remus said through a mouthful of food. “I’ve got no idea where you
got this skill from, though. Neither your mum or your dad were any great shakes in the kitchen.”

Harry ducked his head in embarrassment.

“What do you say we head over to Diagon Alley this morning and get our last minute Christmas shopping out of the way?” Sirius asked.

“Yeah, that’s be good, great idea,” Harry replied.

“Right then, as soon as we’re done here, we’ll head off,” Sirius declared.

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Most of the morning that the three spent in Diagon Alley was spent together, although there were times when one would disappear by themselves, only to meet back up a short while later.

Harry was amazed by the crowds. He might have spent four weeks over the summer living in the Alley, but he was sure that he’d never seen it so crowded. Everywhere that they went, the shops were packed. Families and groups wandered from store to store, all laughing and joking and smiling and seemingly buying up big.

When Harry pointed this out to Remus, it was explained that Diagon Alley was the largest magical shopping area in Great Britain. There were others, like Hogsmede and the magical district of Edinburgh, but they all paled in comparison to Diagon Alley.

“Can we make one more stop?” Harry asked after their pockets were full of shrunken shopping bags.

“Sure, Pup. Where did you want to go?” Sirius asked.

“There’s a shop just up ahead that I really need to visit,” he answered vaguely.

Leading the other two, Harry took them further down the alley until a particular double storied shop came into view. He was particularly pleased to see the steady stream of people going in and out of the doors.

“Hermione’s Book Nook?” Remus asked. “That’s not a coincidence, is it?”

Harry grinned up at the older man. “Nope. I named it after my best friend.”

“This belongs to you?” Remus asked, clearly astonished. “You own the only second hand bookstore and tea shop in the wizarding world? Does Hermione know that you named it after her?”

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “You should have seen her when she first saw it. She nearly hugged me to death.”

“You named a shop after a girl?” Sirius asked. “I’m guessing that she’s into books?” After Remus and Harry’s nod, he burst into laughter. “Kid, it looks like I’m not going to have to teach you much after all. Already you know how to woo the ladies. Although, I’ve got to admit, that is one hell of a gift for a girl. Don’t know how you’re going to top that on Valentine’s Day.”

“What?” a startled Harry nearly yelped. “Hermione and I are just friends. I don’t have to give her something on Valentine’s Day, do I?”

Laughter was his only response as he was led through the doors.

Upon entering Hermione’s Book Nook, Harry immediately stepped to the side and paused. The place
appeared to be doing wonderfully. A dozen or so people were wandering around both the upper and lower levels while even more were sitting at the tables on the café side of the shop. As he watched, he saw a couple appear on the staircase leading down to the muggle books’ section.

And then, out of the bustle, he saw the one person that he was looking for.

“Beth!” he called.

The tall woman’s head whipped around, causing her long hair to flair out behind her and then her blue eyes found him and a massive smile lit up her face.

“Harry!” she exclaimed before rushing over and wrapping him in a massive hug. “It’s so good to see you. How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been good, Beth,” he replied. “The shop looks amazing.”

“You’ve no idea. I’ve even had to hire some extra help to keep up with the customers,” she replied. “But don’t worry, I’ve kept with our hiring policy.”

Harry grinned back at her, before looking around the shop once more. “Where’s Micky?”

“Oh, he’s off with his friends somewhere,” she waved towards the Alley. “He’ll be back later.”

“Harry? Aren’t you going to introduce us to this incredibly beautiful woman who has you wrapped in her arms?” Sirius asked.

Rolling his eyes, Harry motioned to Remus and then to Sirius. “Beth, this Remus Lupin, an old family friend. And that’s Sirius Black, my godfather. Gentlemen, and I expect you to be gentlemen Sirius, this is Beth Pemberton. She runs Hermione’s Book Nook and is the one who looked after me over the summer after I left the Dursleys.”

“A pleasure ma’am,” Remus bowed his head. “Thank you for looking after our boy, here.”

“It’s an absolute delight to meet you, Miss Pemberton,” Sirius smiled before taking her hand and kissing her knuckles.

Beth’s eyebrow rose at Sirius’ antics. “This is one to keep an eye on.”

“You’ve no idea,” Remus intoned.

A wounded Sirius put one hand over his heart as a pout appeared on his face, eliciting laughter all around.

“Do you have time for a visit?” Harry asked, hopefully.

“For you, of course,” Beth replied. “Stacey, I’ll be taking my break now. The owner here wants to have a chat.”

After receiving an acknowledging wave from the girl behind the counter, Beth led the three of them over to a vacant table.

“Now, Harry, tell me everything. I’m sure that you’ve left out a lot in your letters,” Beth instructed.

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While the morning of Christmas Eve was spent decorating the kitchen cum dining room as well as
the one sitting room that was deemed ‘safe’ to use using the box of Christmas decorations that Sirius had liberated from the attic, the afternoon was turned into a much more intense session.

It began with an unexpected door chime just after lunch.

“I wonder who that could be?” Sirius commented as he rose from the armchair that he was slouched in after his morning of decorating.

A short time later, he was back leading Professor McGonagall.

“Professor?” Harry greeted.

“Good afternoon, Mister Potter, Mister Lupin,” she replied.

After all four were comfortably seated, Sirius decided to get the ball rolling. “What is it that we can do for you, Professor?”

“You’re not one of my students any more, Mister Black, please, call me Minerva,” she replied. “The same privilege is extended to you, Mister Lupin.”

“Thank you, ma’am, er, Minerva,” Sirius gave a formal nod of his head. “Please feel free to use our given names as well.”

“I am here in regards to our young Mister Potter,” she said, giving him a small smile. “After the events of the summer, combined with what we now know about the deplorable upbringing that he’s been forced to endure, I thought that it was high time that some proper guidance be given to him.”

“Can’t say that I disagree with you there,” Sirius stated.

A low growl escaped Remus. “I blame myself for disappearing and allowing it to happen.”

“I think we all blame ourselves there, Moony,” Sirius agreed.

“Well, I don’t blame you,” Harry stated meeting each of them in the eye. “None of you knew and the one who should have known, did nothing about it.”

“Indeed, Mister Potter. Which brings us to your particular circumstances and what we need to do to safeguard your future,” Minerva announced.

“What do you mean, Professor?” Harry asked.

“As it currently stands, your primary guardians remain your Aunt and Uncle, regardless of the way that they have treated you and the fact that you ran away from home. Your secondary guardian, the one that you have in the magical world, is, by default, the Headmaster of Hogwarts. In both cases, you will be legally forced to return to Privet Drive at the end of the school year,” Minerva informed him.

“Then I’ll just run away again,” Harry stated forcefully.

“That’s not going to solve anything in the long term, Pup,” Sirius told him. Turning to Professor McGonagall, he continued. “That’s actually part of the reason that I invited Harry here for the holidays. We’re using it as a trial run to see if me becoming his guardian would work for both of us.”

“Indeed?” Minerva raised an eyebrow.

“Well, as you know, James and Lily named me his godfather and if anything ever happened to them,
I was supposed to gain custody of Harry,” Sirius replied.

“And? Have the two of you come to any decisions?” Minerva asked.

“We haven’t actually gotten around to talking about it yet. Pup? How do you feel about it?”

Harry didn’t even have to think about it. Four days of living with Sirius and Remus had been four better days than any of the thousands of days that he’d had to endure with the Dursleys.

“I’d love to stay here with you guys,” he announced.

“There may be a problem with that,” Remus frowned. “One of the things that the Ministry will check is that the primary care-givers have the means to support a minor. And, let’s face it, Sirius, you don’t have a job and while I do, it’s only part time and they wouldn’t give me guardianship anyway as I’m considered a dark creature.”

“But I’m a Black!” Sirius protested.

“Yes, you are. And if you ever got off your bum and actually accepted the ring, then this wouldn’t be a problem,” Remus countered.

“Ring?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, to take up the Lordship of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black,” Sirius waved it off. “But if I do that, then I’d be expected to take my seat in the Wizengamot and I’m not interested in spending my days being bored out of my mind.”

“Not even for Harry?” Remus asked lightly.

Scowling at his friend, Sirius relented. “For Harry, I guess. But I’m not quite ready yet. I want to get this house in order first.”

“I do actually have a compromise in mind that you may be interested in,” Minerva announced, drawing attention instantly on to her.

“I’ve come to realise that leaving Dumbledore as Harry’s magical guardian may not be overly … beneficial for Harry. Even if you, Sirius, became his guardian, Dumbledore would still have a large amount of authority over Harry simply because for nearly ten months of the year, Harry’s lives at Hogwarts.”

“Makes sense,” Remus nodded. “What did you have in mind?”

“I’d like to offer you a partnership, Sirius, in that we both become his guardians.”

Sirius slapped his hand on the armchair as he leant back and roared with laughter. “What a prank to play on Dumbledore, stripping any chance to arrange Harry’s life the way he wants it away from him. What do you say, Pup?”

Harry looked to each adult, reading their expression. Sirius was eager, of course. Remus had a tiny smile, indicating that he thought that it was a good idea, while Professor McGonagall looked impassively back at him. But after the various conversations that he’d had with her, he now knew that she only had his best interests at heart. That wasn’t to say that he completely forgiven her yet for not following up with her promise from last year, but he was close.

“Alright, I agree,” he said.
At once, Sirius was up and out of his chair, yanking Harry up with him to hug the stuffing out of him. Remus too quickly joined in by ruffling his hair.

After a pat on Harry’s shoulder, accompanied by the most genuine smile that he’d ever seen from her, Minerva outlined her plan. “I think that we need to get the paperwork completed, lodged with the Ministry and approved as quickly and as quietly as we can.”

“If you’d like to stay for dinner, Minerva, we could get the paperwork filled out now and then file it straight after Christmas,” Sirius offered.

“Yes, do stay, Harry’s an amazing chef,” Remus agreed.

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“This, Harry is my favourite cousin in the world, Andromeda and her husband, Ted Tonks,” Sirius introduced the next morning.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he said, shaking the hand of the shorter, dark haired man and older regal looking woman.

“I thought I was your favourite cousin,” a voice behind the couple protested.

“Aw, Nymphie, don’t be like that, I only meant that your mother’s been my favourite cousin for the longest amount of time. You know you rank right up there with her,” Sirius responded.

Harry watched as a girl with bubble-gum pink hair stepped into view. If he had to guess, he’d have said that she was either in her late teens or early twenties.

“And this, Harry, is my other favourite cousin, Nymphadora …”

“Don’t call me Nymphadora, Sirius,” she growled.

“Tonks,” he continued, ignoring her glowers. “She only finished at Hogwarts a couple of years ago and now she’s taking after me by joining the aurors.”

“Really?” Harry asked. “You’re an auror?”


With a grin at his godfather, Harry complied. “Alright, Tonks, I will. It’s nice to meet you, Tonks, I’m sure that we’re going to have a lot of fun together. Don’t you agree, Tonks?”

“I believe that we will, Harry.”

Then, after taking his arm and poking her tongue out at her cousin, Tonks led him off through the house. The two of them quickly over-took the adults to duck into the sitting room and grab the best spots in front of the tree.

“Presents!” Tonks cried. “I’ll be Santa!”

And suddenly, she was. Harry scooted back a little in shock. When seconds ago, there was a normal attractive-looking young woman sitting beside him, now there was a Santa wearing Tonks’ clothes. He had a long white beard and hair, a fatter nose and round rosy cheeks. His fat stomach wasn’t quite as big as could be expected, but then, Tonks’ tight jeans and black shirt probably restricted that.
“Tonks?” Harry breathed, seeing the Santa before him wink at him.

“Right in one, kiddo,” she grinned.

“How’d you do that?” he asked, moving closer once again.

“I’m a metamorphmagus,” she replied, and then, obviously seeing his confused expression, she continued, “it means that I have the ability to change the way I look just by thinking about it.”

“Cooool!” Harry exclaimed.

“Enough of that, let’s hand out some presents!” she insisted.

The next hour was filled with laughter, eggnog, flying wrapping paper, oohs and ahs in all the right places and general merriment.

Harry’s haul that year was even better than last year. From Hermione, he received a magnificent eagle feather quill; from Hagrid some treacle fudge that he thought he’d need to warm by the fire before it could be safely eaten; from Neville, a small plant that his note said was a cutting of the magical variety of aloe plant, which was incredibly useful in healing and potions; Remus presented him with a set of deluxe defence against the dark arts books; Beth and Mickey had sent him a large oval magical mirror that could be hung on his wall that immediately started insulting his hair style the instant the wrapping paper fell off; and from Sirius, he was given a collection of three journals, all handwritten by his father, detailing all of the pranks and adventures that he and his friends had gotten up to at Hogwarts, including how they managed to crack the animagus transformation.

And that was only the beginning of the day. Later, there was a magnificent feast prepared by Andromeda, multitudes of stories, Tonks spending hours entertaining all with changing the features of her face and later, even some singing of some Christmas carols.

Overall, it was the best Christmas that he’d ever had.
“Thank you all for coming,” Madam Amelia Bones started, looking around at the three other people sitting at the table with her.

To her immediate right, sat Harry Potter, beside him, his godfather, Sirius Black. To her left, a bored expression on his face, sat Lucius Malfoy.

“You all understand why we are here,” Amelia continued. “On the eighteenth of December, nineteen hundred and ninety two, in the Office of the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Harry Potter did trick Lucius Malfoy into setting his house elf free. Are you all agreed upon that fact?”

“Indeed,” Malfoy drawled.

“Yes, Madam Bones,” Harry replied.

“Upon the release of the house elf, you, Mister Malfoy, expressed your desire that Mister Potter make reparations for the act. At the same time, you, Mister Potter, indicated that you would be willing to pay for the loss of the house elf. Do you both still agree with those statements?” she asked, looking from one to the other.

“Yes, Madam Bones,” Harry replied once again.

A curt nod was Malfoy’s only response.

“In that case, Mister Malfoy, as the aggrieved party, what is the amount that you expect Mister Potter to pay you for the loss of your elf?” Amelia asked.

“The boy lost me a valuable servant,” Malfoy stated. “He will pay me ten thousand galleons for the inconvenience.”

Sirius barked in derision at the statement.

“I don’t see what’s so funny, Black,” Malfoy drawled. “In fact, I still don’t understand why you’re even here.”

“As Harry’s legal guardian, it’s my right to be here,” Sirius growled back. “And an hundred thousand for a house elf? You’ve got to be out of your mind! You could buy an army of house elves for that amount.”

“Nevertheless, the boy defied a Noble Lord and caused him embarrassment, along with the loss of his servant. That is my price,” Malfoy replied.

“The Heir of an Ancient and Most Noble House embarrassed you? Get used to it,” Sirius shot back.

“Gentlemen!” Amelia cut in, glaring at them both until she was sure that they were willing to behave. “Mister Potter, what is your reply to Mister Malfoy’s demand?”

“While I am willing to pay for the loss of your elf, Mister Malfoy, your demand is too far too steep. Your treatment of said elf was deplorable. No being, be they witch, wizard, muggle, elf or goblin should ever be treated that way. I offer you five hundred galleons for the elf and a further five hundred galleons for the embarrassment that I caused you. I would also be willing to make a public
apology in *The Daily Prophet.*"

Amelia watched the boy closely. He’d obviously been schooled well. His face betrayed nothing and his counter was well thought out and more than generous.

“No,” Malfoy replied instantly. “Ten thousand for the loss of the elf. And since you deem the embarrassment worthy of reparation as well, a further ten thousand galleons for that plus the apology in the *Prophet.*”

“Mister Malfoy, negotiations are supposed to work towards a middle ground, not get further apart,” Amelia frowned.

“If the price is too steep, I can take the issue straight to the Wizengamot. I’m sure that it’ll be no trouble to have the House of Potter declared a vassal to the House of Malfoy for the affront that I’ve been given,” Malfoy sneered, leaning back in his arrogance.

“I think you’re right, Pup. It’s time that I took up my ring,” Sirius declared, looking at his godson. “I think I might have to have a look at some of those contracts that the Blacks’ are involved in as well. I can think of a couple of marriages that might need to be dissolved and the dowry reclaimed.”

Amelia saw Malfoy’s eyes widen at the threat. Personally, she thought it was high time that Black did take up his Head of House ring. And if a few families were taken down a peg or two in the process, no one would hear her complaining.

“Mister Malfoy, Mister Potter, before we go any further,” Amelia stated, “I’d like to point out that as of today’s figures, the price for a young, fit healthy house elf is set at two hundred and fifty galleons. I’d also like to point out that I am here to arbitrate this disagreement. There will be no other legal ramifications after this meeting. If the two of you cannot come to an agreement in a timely manner and by that I mean in a time that still allows Mister Potter to make the Hogwarts Express that is due to depart in a little over an hour and a half, then I shall make the decision. And my decision shall be final. Do you both understand?”

“Yes, Madam Bones,” Harry replied.

A sharp nod of the head was accompanied by a scowl from Malfoy.

“Do either of you have any change that you would like to make to your own proposal?” she asked.

“I am willing to raise my offer to seven hundred and fifty galleons for both reparations for the elf and for embarrassment caused, along with the public apology in *The Daily Prophet,*” Harry stated.

“I accept you terms, boy,” Lucius glowered. “I expect payment by the end of the day. If there’s nothing more?”

Before Amelia could respond, the aristocratic man shoved his chair back, rose and stalked from the room.

“That’s a lot more than I would have decided upon, Mister Potter,” Amelia confided.

Harry shrugged. “I figured as much, but I didn’t want to leave him any way to get Dobby back under his thumb again. Thanks for your support, Madam Bones.”

“My pleasure Mister Potter,” she replied. “And Sirius, do take up that ring soon, won’t you. The Wizengamot could do with some fresh blood with a bit of backbone and some morals to it.”
With a nod of his head, Sirius rose. “Come on, Pup, we should have just enough time to make a quick stop at Gringotts before we need to get to King’s Cross.”

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A sudden sharp crack announced the arrival of a tall man in garish purple robes decorated with golden stars in the small lane just outside of Ottery St. Catchpole. After settling his long white beard flat upon his chest, the wizard adjusted his half-moon spectacles and strode out in his required direction.

Before too long, he rounded the last bend to come face to face with his destination. A large, five story ramshackle house that looked too impossible to exist, stood proudly before him. Entering the gate, the wizard picked his way through the old cauldrons, rubber boots, chickens and garden gnomes to reach the door that he knew led to the house’s kitchen.

A single knock on the door produced the desired results.

“Oh, Albus, it’s so good to see you again,” Molly Weasley said. “Do come in, won’t you? I take it nothing’s wrong with the children is there?”

“Thank you, Molly, and no, not that I’m aware of. They should be winging their way to Hogwarts on the Express for a few more hours yet,” Dumbledore replied.

“Sit, sit,” Molly instructed, waving at the long kitchen bench. “Can I get you a cup of tea?”

“That would be most pleasant,” Dumbledore replied, his blue eyes twinkling away merrily.

After placing two cups on the table, Molly sat across from the aged wizard.

“What is it that I can do for you, Albus?” she asked.

“Actually, Molly, I’m here with a proposal that may benefit one of your own,” Dumbledore replied.

“Oh?” Molly replied, her interest piqued.

“Indeed. In fact, when it boils right down to it, I come on behalf of another,” he stated.

“And who might that be, Albus?” Molly asked.

“Harry Potter.”

That, he was immensely pleased to see, had caught her attention.

“I have learned that he’s become, shall we say a little … infatuated with your youngest, young Ginerva,” he stated lightly.

Molly cooed. “Oh, has he? Ginny must be so pleased. She’s been dreaming of The-Boy-Who-Lived for years.”

A small smile graced Dumbledore’s face. “I’m afraid that, boys being boys, he has yet to make his intentions known to young Ginerva. However, that is no reason why the two of us can’t play … matchmaker and give them a little hand, hmm?”

Molly’s face nearly split, she was smiling so hard. “What was it that you had in mind, Albus?”

“Given their ages, I believe that they won’t be ready for courting officially until next year. But over
the summer, I thought that arranging for young Harry to spend some time here might give the two a chance to get to know one another outside of school. Assuming, of course, that you are amenable to the idea,” he said.

“Well, of course the boy’s always welcome here, you know that, Albus. And it’ll be good for Ron to have a friend over as well,” Molly replied.

“Wonderful, wonderful, I was sure that you would agree,” Dumbledore replied before lifting his cup to sip at his tea.

After a minute or so to allow Molly’s fantasies of having The-Boy-Who-Lived as a son-in-law to sink in, he decided that it was time to broach the next part of his visit.

“Come to think of it, Molly, knowing how the two young people already feel about each other, there’s no reason why, as their guardians, we cannot ensure their future now,” Dumbledore stated, making sure that his eye was twinkling away.

“What did you have in mind, Albus,” Molly asked, hope clear in her voice.

“Why, a betrothal contract, of course,” Dumbledore replied airily. “I suspect that the instant that young Harry comes of age, he’ll be inundated with offers so it is only prudent that we make sure that first love cannot be … interfered with.”

“Yes, yes, I see your point,” Molly replied.

It didn’t take an expert in legilimency to see that Molly would sign whatever he placed in front of her. Pulling out the contract that he had already drawn up, he placed it on the table.

“This is a standard betrothal contract, Molly,” he explained. “Harry and Ginerva would be required to marry within twelve months of the younger, in this case Ginerva, reaching her majority. Seeing as the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter is quite wealthy, I thought that a dowry of one hundred thousand galleons to be paid to House Weasley on the activation of the contract would be more than fair, with a further five hundred thousand galleons to be paid as the bride price.

“Would that be acceptable to you, Molly?”

Molly’s head was nodding as her eyes raced across the script in front of her. “I really should call Arthur home to sign this,” Molly mused.

“So, there’s no need to bother Arthur at work, Molly, you are more than capable as signing the contract for the House,” Dumbledore reminded her.

“In that case, where do I sign?”

Conjuring a quill, Dumbledore handed it to her and indicated the required places.

“Don’t forget to date it,” he reminded her.

Folding the contract, he placed it into an inner pocket of his robes.

“I’ll have his lodged with Gringotts and the Ministry within the next day or two,” he told her. Then, “there’s no need to mention this to anyone at this time, I think. We wouldn’t want to taint the natural feelings of the two, would we?”

“No, you’re right, Albus, let them fall in love and when they come of age, it’ll be all that much easier
“Well, I must be off, a Headmaster’s job is never done, you know,” he stated before giving a short bow and leaving a slightly bouncy Molly Weasley sitting at the table.

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“Welcome back one and all,” Headmaster Dumbledore declared from the lectern in front of his golden throne. “Welcome back to another term of learning and fun. Before we begin our feast and you all become befuddled, I would like to get the seriousness out of the way. As you all would have noticed upon your arrival back at the Castle, there have been a number of changes made.

“Firstly, in your absence, Hogwarts was searched from the top of the Astronomy Tower to the bottom of the dungeons in an attempt to find the cause of what has befallen some of our number. While nothing was found, that does not mean that the Castle has been declared safe. You are all required to become constantly vigilant. Do not move about the castle alone for the foreseeable future. Curfews will be strictly monitored.

“Second, I’m sure that you all noticed the presence of the aurors stationed outside the Great Hall when you entered? A full squad of aurors has been loaned to us from the DMLE. They will be patrolling the hallways and will be escorting you all to your classes as much as is practically possible. You are to obey any instructions that you are given by one of our fine aurors. And this is not the time to be playing pranks on them either. They are more likely to stun first and ask questions later. This is for your own safety as much as it is for theirs.

“Lastly, I would implore each and every one of you to notify either one of your professors or one of the aurors if you come across anything strange or out of the ordinary or something that seems dangerous. The sooner we can find what has been petrifying the inhabitants of the Castle and have it removed, the sooner these restrictions can be lifted.

“Thank you all. And now, I believe, it’s time to feast.”

As the platters of delectable food appeared on the Gryffindor table, conversations up and down its length broke out about the Headmaster’s speech.

“Do you think that he meant all pranks, brother of mine, or just pranks aimed at the aurors?” George asked.

“I would have to assume pranks against the aurors, oh second best looking one of us,” Fred replied.

“Yes, I think that I agree with your assessment, less intelligent twin,” George countered.

“Business as usual then,” they agreed together.

Further down the table, their younger brother Ron was in a discussion with Seamus and Dean, although it was debatable whether or not the two boys could actually understand what Ron was saying with all of that food in his mouth.

“If we’re supposed to report anything strange or dangerous to the aurors, shouldn’t we just go report Slytherin House now?” he asked. “I mean, the whole ruddy lot of them are strange and no one can deny that they’re dangerous. Just think how many dark curses they’ve probably already been taught by the parents.”

Even further down the table, the expressions were rather grim.
“I notice Dumbledore didn’t mention anything about when Lil and the others will be unpetrified,” Hermione noted.

“If it’s a case of needing mature mandrakes, you’d think that there’d be some somewhere in the country that could be bought to make the potion,” Harry agreed.

“It’s the climate,” Neville pointed out, “mandrakes have a very specific growing rate dependant on the climate. Every plant in the country will be at the exact same stage as the ones in our greenhouses.”

“Then why don’t they just import some from South America or Australia or something?” Hermione asked. “Surely it wouldn’t cost that much, especially in comparison to four people having their entire lives put on hold for months at a time.”

“You’ve said it yourself, Hermione, most witches and wizards don’t have an ounce of logic to them,” Harry pointed out. “None of them have probably even thought about the possibility of importing it. I’d buy it myself but I just don’t have the funds right now, especially after having to pay off Lucius Malfoy for freeing Dobby like that.”

“I understand, Harry, and that was an incredibly good thing that you did,” Hermione smiled as she patted his arm. “I’m very proud of you.”
Chapter 29

Wizarding photos were spread out across a wide area of the Gryffindor House table. There were photos of different parts of the castle and grounds, multiple ones of students, a classic pose of Peeves blowing a raspberry at the camera and dozens and dozens of quidditch shots.

Thankfully, as it was a Saturday mid-morning, the table was only occupied by a handful of people, all of whom had given the Hogwarts Photography Club ample space to view their handiwork. This was the first time that the club had been able to view their endeavours in the daylight since they’d formed.

It’d taken the three of them, the entirety of the club, far longer than one would think to nut down a time to meet. Then had come teaching each other what they already knew of photography; securing not only a room, but also the supplies needed to develop wizarding photos; and then teaching each other how to do that correctly.

Now, the first Saturday after the Christmas holidays, Harry, Colin Creevey and Damien O’Hara had been able to get together. The small mousey-haired Colin was near bouncing from one end of the photos to the other in his excitement to see them all. In contrast, Damien, a bespectacled, tall sixth year Hufflepuff with a decided paunch around the middle, was taking the slow methodical approach. He was bent nearly double as he peered intently at photo after photo.

Every now and again, one of the three would move a particular photo to one end of their work space. Those closest to the Head Table were deemed the pick of the batch; those placed closer to the doors, were their failures.

Harry’s absolute favourite was a toss-up between two, one taken by him, the other by Colin. Colin’s photo showed Harry flying on his broom, right arm clearly broken tucked into his side as his left hand stretched out and plucked the snitch out of the air. The expression of absolute delight mixed with intense concentration and a hint of pain captured that match perfectly.

The photo that he’d taken was a softer, more gentle one. It was taken using a wide angle of the Black Lake. Close to the shore, Neville could be seen wading through the water, occasionally bending over to examine a plant, while further up the bank, back against a tree, sat Hermione, a book balanced on her knees.

“As your Club’s sponsor,” Professor McGonagall stated, having suddenly appeared on the opposite side of the table, “I should think that it is appropriate that I display one of your photographs on my wall. A copy of this one, I think, would be perfect.”

Harry grinned at the Professor’s choice. It was a group shot of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team after one of their training sessions. The seven of them were grouped together, the three girls sitting on the grass, while the four boys stood behind them. They were all laughing at some joke or other that one of the twins had told while the golden snitch flew in lazy circles around the team.

“Good choice, Professor,” Harry said. “That’s one of Colin’s. We’ll get it framed for you as soon as we can.”

With a nod, she continued on her way.

Professor McGonagall hadn’t been the first to admire their efforts that morning. Quite a few dozen had wandered by, pointing out this or that particular photo and asking a bit about the Club. None
though had been inclined to join them.

“Ooh, I like this one. You can almost see the blibbering humdingers trailing along after the bludger.”

Startled, Harry looked up into the large grey eyes of the one that he thought of as She-Who-Talks-To-Books. Close up, her radish earrings and butterbeer cork necklace seemed to suit the long blonde haired, wraith-like girl. She looked back at him in a way that made Harry feel as though she was not so much looking at him, but more examining his very soul.

“Um, I … I hadn’t noticed,” he eventually managed.

“That’s alright Harry Potter, not many people do,” she smiled. “I’m Luna, by the way, Luna Lovegood.”

“Hi, Luna, it’s nice to meet you,” he replied. “Do you like photography?”

“Oh yes, Daddy’s always trying to get a photo of crumple-horned snorklacks or moon frogs whenever we got on holidays to find them,” she replied absently.

“That’s … that’s nice,” he replied, wondering what in the world she was talking about. “Would you be interested in joining the Photography Club, then?”

“Hmm, no, no I don’t think that’s quite the right club for me, but thank you for asking Harry Potter, that has to have been one of the nicest things that anyone’s ever said to me,” she smiled.

Harry stared back at the slight girl. He’d had it pretty tough over the years, but to have a simple invitation like that be considered ‘one of the nicest things that anyone’s ever said’ defied even his imagination.

“Then obviously you’ve never met many nice people,” Harry stated.

“I guess not. Definitely none like you, Harry Potter,” she replied airily.

“Um, excuse me, Luna?” a soft voice interrupted.

Harry looked across to see Lisa, one of his Ravenclaw study partners standing nervously not far away.

“Yes, Lisa Turpin?” Luna asked.

“I’ve seen you around the Ravenclaw common rooms with a book that looks like this one,” Lisa began, holding up a small, black leather-bound book. “I found this up on the Astronomy Tower and I was wondering if it was yours.”

Luna regarded the book blankly for nearly a minute before a tiny shiver took hold of her entire body. A fleeting look of … fear … seemed to cross her face before she lifted her eyes to meet Lisa’s.

“While it is true that I had that book in my possession for a time, it was never mine,” Luna announced.

“Oh, then, do you know who it belongs to?” Lisa asked.

“It belongs to Tom, of course, although he isn’t in a position to take the book back any more. I attempted to clean it for him, but I fear that I failed. If you wish to keep it, be aware of the wrackspurts that inhabit it, they can do terrible things to your mind.”
This last part was whispered by Luna, her sudden unexpected intensity enhanced by the way that she leant towards Lisa.

“I must be off, Harry Potter,” Luna stated turning her clear grey eyes back onto him. “Thank you for showing me your photographs.”

“Um, your welcome, Luna,” he replied, but she was already skipping towards the doors leading to the Entrance Hall. Once she was far enough away, he looked at Lisa. “Is she always like that?”

“Pretty much,” Lisa sighed.

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The next few weeks of school passed by in a blur of normalness. There were classes to attend; Harry’s tutorial sessions began once more, although with greatly reduced attendance; and despite the weather, Oliver Wood had the Gryffindor Quidditch Team out practicing as much as he thought that he could get away with.

The only two things that particularly stood out for Harry and his friends were the heavy presence of the aurors throughout the castle and the absence of Draco Malfoy. That’s not to say that Malfoy was no longer in the castle. He was. It was just that without his bodyguards to provide the threat of retribution, Malfoy kept to himself. He chose seats at the back of each class. He studiously avoided interacting with any of his Slytherin classmates and any time that he encountered Harry or Hermione in particular, he kept his mouth firmly closed. There were no threats, no taunts, no blood-related slurs of any kind.

Added to that was the fact that the castle was now almost sparkling. The house elves, it seemed, did the caretaker’s job a thousand times better than Mister Filch ever did. And without the nasty jabs and growls that usually accompanied the crotchety old squib.

All in all, it was decided that, if it wasn’t for poor Lil, the petrifications that had taken place wouldn’t have been a bad thing.

Everything remained blessedly the same. That was until the morning that Harry walked into the Great Hall and immediately felt like throwing up. Everywhere he looked, a horrible pinkness prevailed. The walls had taken on the hue, pink confetti fell from the enchanted ceiling, groups of red, pink and white balloons dotted the four tables at regular intervals and tiny pink pixies swooped about.

As he was taking his seat, he noticed his worst nightmare approaching the lectern in front of the staff table.

“Good morning, everyone,” a lurid pink-robed Lockhart called jovially, “and Happy Valentine’s day to you all! Today, of course, is the day traditionally set aside for love, for couples, for those you have a romantic eye on that special someone. And before I forget, thank you to those amazing forty-seven people who have already sent me a Valentine’s Day card today. Now, as a special treat to you all, I’ve arranged a little fun.”

A sudden clomping of heavy boots spun Harry’s head around in time to see a dozen horribly dressed dwarves, outfitted as extremely big, extremely ugly and extremely mean-looking cupids. Bringing up the rear were a group of four murderous-looking aurors. Harry guessed that they’d been assigned the odious task of guarding said dwarven cupids for the day.

“My fine romantic friends here,” Lockhart continued, gesturing to the dwarves, “will be around the
castle today. So if you have a special little something that you’d like delivered, just let them know and they’ll be more than happy to do so for you.”

Fortunately, the rest of Lockhart’s speech was cut off by the arrival of the post owls. Harry suspected that he would have attempted to continue with it if it wasn’t for the enormous parliament that descended upon the man standing at the lectern.

Harry was so busy laughing at the man’s predicament, that at first he failed to notice the owls landing amongst the surrounding dishes. A sharp nip by Hedwig brought his focus back to the important things, namely her.

“Here you go, Hedwig,” he said, holding up a rasher of bacon.

“Oh, Harry, you shouldn’t have,” Hermione suddenly gushed before launching herself on him.

As he attempted to extradite himself, he was of the opinion that she was right. But then, he’d thought a simple card accompanied by a rose was quite acceptable. And it was Neville who had assured him that a yellow rose gave the simple message of friendship.

“Hermione, you’re going to want to let Harry go,” Neville interrupted, “he’s got a couple of owls that are wanting his attention.”

“Oh, of course,” she said, releasing him with a blush.

Turning to the two owls before him, Harry quickly untied their letters before giving them a treat and sending them off.

Opening the first one, Harry found a card written in Hermione’s perfect script.

*Dear Harry, Happy Valentine’s day. Love, your friend, Hermione.*

“Thanks, Hermione,” he said, feeling his cheeks go warm.

“You’re very welcome,” she replied before ducking her head.

Turning to the second one, he found a much more elaborately designed card. Puzzled, he opened it and read the message inside.

*Dear Harry, Even without knowing me, you acted to protect me at great risk to your own life, saving me in the process. For that, you will always hold a special place in my heart. Happy Valentine’s Day, Daphne.*

“Who’s that one from?” Neville asked.

“Daphne,” he replied, confused before holding it out to Neville. “Do you think it’s got something to do with that life debt thing you and Mister Greengrass were talking about from last year?”

Neville nodded slowly. “I wouldn’t be surprised. Although, it could be that she just finds you cute.”

Sticking his tongue out at his friend, Harry took the card back and came to a decision. “I think that I’m going to have to have another talk with Daphne. Without her father around this time.”

-oOoOo-

Finding the opportunity to talk to Daphne that day was nigh on impossible. There were classes to attend and the fact that she was in a different House didn’t help. Nor did the ever present presence of
the aurors or the dwarves.

Harry found himself running afoul of the dwarves not long before lunch. One particular tutu-wearing dwarf had singled him out in a crowded corridor, chased him down, tackled him, sat on his legs and then sprouted poetry at him. Very, very bad poetry. The fact that there was an incredibly red-faced Ginny Weasley in the crowd who ran off in near hysterics was a good indication of who had sent it.

Finally, Harry decided to simply wait just outside the doors to the Great Hall and try to catch Daphne before dinner.

“Daphne!” he called, ignoring all of the ‘oohs’ that immediately sprung up around them. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

With a short nod of her head, she led him into the small room where all of the first years waited to be sorted.

“Um, hi,” he began, suddenly incredibly nervous.

Daphne’s piercing blue eyes locked on to his as she gave a small smile. “Hello, Harry.”

“Um, I … I wanted to thank you for the card that you sent,” he said.

She shrugged and crinkled her nose.

Realising that she wasn’t going to make it any easier for him, he plunged on. “I was wondering why you sent it, though. It’s not like we’ve had much to do with each other.”

Daphne sighed, before looking around the room, making her long blonde hair sway about her shoulders. Finding what she was looking for, she walked over and took a seat on one of the few chairs in the room. With a pat on the chair beside her, Harry complied and took a seat.

“Look. Harry. I get your confusion. Really, I do,” she said. “And believe me, it wasn’t my idea to send you that card. I’m not blind. I can see the way you and Granger are.”

“What?” Harry exclaimed. “What do you mean, me and Hermione? And if it wasn’t your idea to send it, then whose was it?”

“You were raised in the muggle world, Harry, so there’s a lot that you don’t understand,” Daphne dropped her head, obviously deep in thought. “Let me see if I can explain.”

“You saw what I wrote in the card, that I sent it because you saved my life?” she began.

Harry nodded.

“Well, in the magical world, and especially among the pure-blood circles, that’s a really big thing. That’s why my dad wanted to talk to you back in September. And even though you basically told my dad that simply being friends was enough, for him, for saving my life, it’s not. It simply doesn’t measure up to the code that we live by,” here she looked up to meet his eyes once more. “Do you understand?”

“I think so,” he replied slowly, “but I didn’t save your life to get something out of you. It was just the right thing to do.”

“I know, Harry. I’ve watched you. I know that it’s just a part of who you are,” she smiled. “But it’s not enough for my dad. If we were of age, or if you had an adult who could be your Head of House,
he’d be negotiating for a betrothal between us.”

“But we’re only twelve!” Harry protested.

Daphne waved off his objection. “I know it’s not common these days, but this is a special circumstance and my dad’s honour would demand nothing less of him. Believe me, Harry, it’s got nothing to do with how I feel about you.”

“Okay, okay, I think I can see where he’s coming from even if I don’t agree with it,” Harry replied. “But what’s that got to do with you sending me a Valentine’s Day card?”

“As the daughter of Lord Greengrass, I was instructed to make sure that I continue to make you see me in a positive light. And especially encouraged to try to make that a … romantic sort of thing if at all possible,” she blushed. “Thus, the card.”

Harry bowed his head in thought. “So you only sent the card so that you could tell your dad that you’re following his instructions?”

“That’s right,” she replied. “Please don’t read any more into it than that.”

“Okay, it’s for your dad,” suddenly he had an idea. “Um, I guess you would have heard about the private tutoring lessons that I’m having?” At her nod he continued. “If you like, you could always come along as well. It’d give you something else to tell your dad.”

Her eyes glazed over for a minute as she thought over his suggestion. “Could I bring Tracey and Fiona along?”

“Sure, with all that Heir of Slytherin thing going on at the moment, there’s plenty of space,” he said dejectedly.

“Thank you, Harry,” she smiled.

Harry nodded absently, still deep in thought. “But what does that have to do with me and Hermione?”

Daphne looked taken aback by the question.

“I thought that would be obvious,” she finally said.

“Sorry, not to me,” Harry replied.

“But it’s obvious how you feel about her. And more than obvious how she feels about you,” Daphne blurted. “I mean, the whole school saw the two of you at breakfast.”

Harry’s head shot back up and whipped around to stare at Daphne in shock.
Hermione laid one quill aside, only to immediately take up a second. After a little while, she paused and sat back to admire her handiwork. A small smile graced her lips in pleasure at the schedule that she’d developed. Every subject was colour coded. There was time allotted to ‘spare time’ and even meals. Normal classes were differentiated by shade as opposed to its corresponding revision time.

Yes, she decided, it’d do perfectly. And with the Easter holidays only hours away, it was done none too soon. Brandishing her wand, she replicated the revision and study timetable twice.

“Hey, Hermione, what you got there?”

Looking up, she found herself face to face with her round-faced, friend.

“Neville! Perfect timing. Here, this one’s for you,” she said, passing across one of the time-tables.

“Er, what exactly is this, Hermione?” Neville asked, deep furrows cutting into his face as he frowned.

“Your study timetable,” she explained. “Exams are only six weeks away and we’ve got to start preparing. Really, I should have had this done ages ago, but time seemed to get away from me. We’ll be able to make a good start on it over the holidays.”

Neville nodded his head at her, a somewhat frightened look on his face which, Hermione considered a good thing. At least he’d realised what little time they had left to study for their exams.

“Do you know where Harry is? I’ve got his copy here, too,” she said, brandishing the parchment.

Neville’s eyes shifted to and fro as though he was searching for a way out of answering the question.

As Hermione waited for an answer, she found herself frowning at the thought of their messy-haired friend. He’d seemed distant, distracted for the past couple of months. She knew that there was something bothering him, but for the life of her, she just couldn’t get him to tell her what it was. And every time that she confronted him about it, he’d hummed and hawed, before quickly making up some excuse to run from the room.

There had only been the one time that she’d managed to corner him. He’d been back late from Quidditch practise and therefore tired. His defences were down and she’d managed to trick the tiniest amount of information out of him. Not that she’d been able to make much sense out of it.

Yes, Daphne Greengrass had said something to him that had confused him. No, it had nothing to do with the Valentine’s Day Card that Daphne had sent him. Yes, she’d be the first person that he told once he’d sorted it all out. And then he’d clammed up and raced off for the dormitories.

Finally, Neville sighed and began pulling out the things that he’d need to finish his potions essay from his bag.

“Have you heard that we need to choose our third year electives these holidays?” Neville asked, his face still buried in his bag.

“Oh, yes. Some of us are going to get together tomorrow to discuss what we know about the subjects to help us choose,” Hermione replied, before, “and don’t change the subject, Neville Longbottom! Do you know where Harry is?”
“He said something about wanting some time to himself,” Neville muttered.

With a glare and a slam as she closed one book, Hermione pulled another one towards her. “I just wish that he’d tell us what’s going on. Surely he knows that we’d help no matter what it is.”

-oOoOo-

For his part, Harry was holed up down in his secret cupboard. It wasn’t easy sneaking into it, not with the aurors still patrolling the corridors, but somehow he’d managed it. Even though there hadn’t been any more attacks since before Christmas, the aurors weren’t going to be leaving the school until the four that were petrified had been cured and were able to tell everyone what had attacked them.

Sitting on his coil of rope, Harry struggled with his potions essay. Doing any sort of work for Professor Snape was never easy. Even perfection was never good enough where Harry was concerned. And now, without using the extra books from the library that he would have normally have used, it was all the more difficult. He was just thankful that he’d managed to acquire a couple of good potions books in his March allotment of books from Beth.

With a sigh, he picked up his quill and wrote the next short paragraph that he felt his essay on the use of boomslang skin in potions warranted.

A couple more days, that was all he needed. A couple more days and he felt that things could go back to the way that they were.

After what Daphne had told him about the rumours that were starting to circulate around the school about he and Hermione, he’d taken drastic action. Almost immediately, he’d distanced himself from her as much as possible. With luck, the two months that they’d rarely had any extra contact with each other would put an end to that rumour.

And hopefully, that’d then be the end of two rumours. Well, on second thought, probably not. But at least they should both be greatly reduced. He supposed that there were always going to be spreading rumours about the supposed love life of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Of the other rumour, the one about him being the Heir of Slytherin, the next Dark Lord and the one responsible for all of the attacks, that had pretty much died off. Every now and again, he heard talk from one of the older Slytherins suggesting that he’d only stopped since, with the aurors in the castle ready to arrest him, it was the smart thing to do.

But silencing all of the rumours still didn’t answer that one question that kept cropping up at the oddest times: did he just consider Hermione as a friend or as something more? They were only twelve and thirteen after all.

-oOoOo-

A mess of brochures, books and letters littered the large round table that had become known as the Second Year Study Table in the library. There were brochures covering all of the different subjects that Hogwarts offered the third to fifth year students: Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Care of Magical Creatures, Divination and Muggle Studies. Even more brochures extolled the virtues of this career over that, which career sought what elective specialisations and what grades were expected if someone wanted to enter a particular field.

Every book for every year for every elective was piled haphazardly in the centre of the table as well and, interspersing it all, were the letters from the family and friends of those around the table, each offering their own opinions and recommendations.
“Listen to this bit, everyone,” Hannah Abbot suddenly called, stilling hands and eyes around the table. “It’s a letter from my Gram.

“It baffles me why so many electives that were offered at Hogwarts during my own time no longer appear to be available for you, my dear. When it was my time to choose my third year electives, there were eleven electives: the five that remain for you to choose from, along with Magical Studies, Spell Crafting, Beginning Healing, Muggle Technology and Beginning Alchemy. Of course, even back then, my own grandmother was telling me of even more electives that she had access to in her day.

“I guess that none of that really is of any help to you my dear, so I’ll say only this – think about what you’re good at. Think about what you enjoy. And then choose those electives that fall into at least one and preferably both of those categories. You’re going to be stuck doing them for at least three years, remember, maybe longer.”

“There were once even more electives to choose from?” Justin asked.

“I wonder why they stopped offering them?” Hermione near growled, leaving everyone in no doubt that there were one or two (or five) that she’d quickly choose from Hannah’s Gram’s list.

“I think that’s good advice that she offered, though,” Susan commented. “Especially if we’re going to be stuck doing it for years.”

“We have to pick two, right?” Harry asked, leafing through the third year Muggle Studies textbook.

“We have to pick a minimum of two,” Hermione corrected.

“I can’t see many people wanting to do Divinations,” Padma commented. “Prophecies may be real and all, but if you haven’t got the gift, I don’t see the point.”

“Yeah, but I heard Professor Trelawney’s a bit batty and it’s an easy Owl,” Neville commented as he stared between two letters from two different family members.

“Hmph, sounds right up my twin’s alley then,” Padma commented dryly.

“Well, I’m thinking of signing up for all five,” Hermione commented.

“Hermione, you can’t do all five of them,” Su Li protested. “It’s just not physically possible to attend all of the classes.”

“Oh, it is doable,” Lisa remarked with the oddest smirk on her face.

“I think that we’ve had enough time to go through all of this,” Terry commented, indicating the mess in the centre of the table. “How about we go through them one by one.”

After nods all around, he continued. “Since we were already talking about Divination, let’s start there. Is there anyone apart from Hermione that’s interested in taking it?”

The other ten around the table, including Terry, all shook their heads.

“Right, that was an easy one. What about Muggle Studies?” he asked.

Hermione, of course, was the first one with her hand in the air, quickly followed by Susan and Hannah.

“I think it could be useful depending on what branch of the Ministry I end up working in,” Susan
commented.

“Why aren’t you taking it, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“Hermione, I’m muggle-raised, you know that,” he retorted. “I know it all already.”

“And that’s why you should do it,” she countered. “It’ll be fascinating to study it from a wizarding perspective.”

At Harry’s incredulous look, she continued, “and it’ll be an easy Owl.”

Harry found himself somewhat persuaded by her arguments, but still felt that the subjects that he’d settled on would be more than enough.

“You know that you don’t need to have actually sat the classes to do the Owl, don’t you?” Su asked.

“You don’t?” Harry asked, and before Hermione could protest, he made his decision. “In that case, I’ll get the text book, study it in my own time and just sit the Owl at the end of fifth year for ‘an easy Owl’. How does that sound, Hermione?”

Her narrowed eyes were a clear indication that she wasn’t entirely happy with the solution; however, she grudgingly nodded her head.

“So, three and a half of us,” Terry summarised. “Let’s move along to Care of Magical Creatures, then.”

By the time the debate of the merits or lack thereof in relation to the subject had finally wound down, the three Gryffindors at the table, along with the four Hufflepuffs had all agreed to sign up for it. None of the three Ravenclaws had even shown a hint of interest, though.

“Now, Arithmancy, anyone?” asked Terry, continuing to drive the direction of the conversation.

“That’s like some kind of advanced mathematics, right?” Neville asked, quickly followed by, “in that case, count me out.”

“I’m with Neville on this one,” Hannah agreed. “The tutor that I had before Hogwarts never focussed too much on maths.”

“I wonder why it is that we don’t have some sort of mathematics course in our first two years,” Hermione mused. “The magical-raised don’t get taught much maths when they’re growing up and the muggleborns who would normally have had an advantage have just spent two years letting their knowledge go all rusty.”

“For that matter, why don’t we have proper English lessons where we can learn how to write essays like the Professors want instead of having us bumble along like idiots for the first year,” Justin, another muggleborn, agreed.

“No one ever said that witches and wizards did things logically,” Harry commented.

“So, who’s interested in arithmancy?” Terry asked, obviously trying to move the conversation along.

“It’s supposed to be one of the hardest electives, but also one of the most useful in a range of careers – potions, spell crafting, warding and healing,” Su pointed out.

Unsurprisingly, the three Ravenclaws were all interested in signing up for it, as was both Hermione, Justin and Harry.
“What?” Harry asked when he saw the surprised look that Hermione was giving him. “I was really good at maths back in primary school. Plus I enjoyed it.”

“Moving right along,” Terry interrupted. “Last, but not least in our options, is Ancient Runes. A subject deemed useful in spell crafting, warding and curse breaking to name but a few careers and the one that I find the most interesting of all of our options.”

“Judging by the way that everyone was talking before, I don’t think that you’re going to get much disagreement from any of us,” Padma pointed out.

A quick head count indicated that she was right. All eleven of them were going to be signing up for it.

“Right, then, if everyone’s finished picking, all we need to do is fill out our forms and hand them in to our Head of House,” Terry instructed.

With nods all around, quills were dug out, heads went down and the scratching of quills on parchment commenced.

-oOoOo-

The following week was pure joy for Hermione. There were no classes, but she was happily studying away, squirreling all of the information that she’d need for her end of year exams in a couple of months’ time. But it wasn’t just the studying that she was doing that had Hermione so happy, no, it was primarily because she finally felt like she had her best friend back.

The first morning of the Easter Holidays, Harry had plonked himself down in the big red couch in front of the fire beside her and started talking to her. It wasn’t anything important, but it was real talk, not that fake, shifty-eyed, let-me-escape-from-her-as-quickly-as-I-can that he’d been doing for the past couple of months.

And even though he still refused to say what had been eating at him, other than a “don’t worry about it, Hermione, I’ve got it all sorted,” she found that just having Harry back treating her like he used to was enough.

Even now as she was sitting in front of the fire with Harry, Neville, Fred and George, laughing at the twin’s latest jokes and eating some chocolate (what her parents didn’t know, wouldn’t hurt them), her mind wondered to the enigma that was Harry and she came to a startling realisation. Hiding himself away and withdrawing from others when he was hurt or confused or worried or stressed was just his way. It was the behaviour that he’d taught himself so that he could survive living with those … people.

And that told her exactly where he’d been disappearing to. She could have hit herself, being dense like that. At least now if he ever disappeared again she’d know exactly where to find him.
Chapter 31

As Harry walked into the Great Hall the morning of the match, he received the first shock of the day.

“Sirius!” he shouted.

In an instant he was off, running across the hall and around the Gryffindor Table to tackle his godfather in a great hug.

“It’s great to see you! What you doing here?” he asked.

“I heard that Gryffindor House had this amazing seeker these days and I just had to come and see this marvel for myself,” Sirius smiled.

“Really? You came just to watch me play?” Harry asked.

“Course I did, Pup! I wanted my first Quidditch experience since I gained my freedom to be watching you fly. Look, I even came dressed for the part,” he exclaimed, pulling out a long Gryffindor scarf from his pocket to wrap around his neck.

“Be thankful that it’s just the scarf,” Remus deadpanned.

“Why?” Harry laughed, shaking the man’s hand.

“When I first saw him this morning, he’d charmed his robes to flash alternating red and gold patterns. He looked like a damn Christmas Tree decoration!”

Sirius pouted before pulling Harry down onto a seat and starting to load a plate of eggs, bacon, sausages and toast for him.

“Gotta keep up your strength,” Sirius insisted. “You never know long you’ll be up in the air for.”

Harry’s protests were interrupted by a wave of fellow Gryffindors joining them at the table.

“Good morning, Hermione, Neville,” Remus smiled. “Boys.”

“Good morning, Professor Lupin,” Hermione and Neville chorused.

“So you’re Hermione, eh?” Sirius said, “I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m Sirius Black, Harry’s godfather.”

Harry nearly choked on his eggs at the smirk his godfather was giving him. Hurriedly, he swallowed his mouthful.

“It’s all good, I promise, Hermione,” he said to her raised eyebrow.

A small smile appeared around the corners of her mouth. “I’d hope so, Mister Potter. It’s nice to finally meet you, Mister Black. Harry’s told us a lot about you, too.”

“None of that Mister Black nonsense,” Sirius waved, “call me Sirius.”

“And this is Neville Longbottom and these are the Fred and George Weasley. They’re on the team with me. Beaters,” Harry introduced.
“Nice to meet you boys,” Sirius replied before suddenly turning to Remus. “Hey, Moony, remember that game back in fifth year when I played Beater?”

Remus groaned. “Don’t remind me, Padfoot. I wasn’t even on the team and because of your hijinks I ended up getting detention with you and Prongs.”

Harry grinned between the two men. “I smell a story.”

“Well, you see, Harry,” Sirius grinned back, “your dad and I had cooked up this plan to distract the Slytherin Keeper and then to put him out of the game. All we needed was Moony wearing the appropriate costume while your Dad faked at scoring and I smacked a bludger at him. Would have worked too, if Remus here hadn’t decided to get up and move from where he was supposed to be sitting.”

Remus’ groan was interrupted by a black-cloaked figure towering over the small group.

“Black. To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?” Professor Snape drawled.

Sirius slowly turned around in his seat. “Snivellus.”

“Visitors to the school are supposed to report directly to either the Headmaster or to one of the Head of Houses on arrival. I would have thought you’d have learnt that lesson while you were in Azkaban, Black. But then, I guess mass-murderers don’t get many visitors, do they?” Snape sneered.

“That’s Lord Black, to you, Snivellus,” Sirius stated, holding up his right hand to clearly display a ring. “And for your information, I’ve already paid my respects to Minerva this morning.”

With a sniff, Snape turned and strode away, his cloak billowing behind him as usual.

“Do you think that he’s just constantly gassy or is it some sort of charm that makes his cloak blow out like that?” Sirius idly wondered, eliciting multiple guffaws around the table.

“Padfoot! There are children here!” Remus admonished.

“Padfoot?” George asked awe clear in his voice.

“Moony?” Fred echoed, his eyes glazed over.

The two old Marauders looked at each other. “Yes?”

Instantly, the two red-heads fell from their chair to land on their knees. Lifting their hands, they bowed until their noses were nearly touching the ground over and over and over again.

“We’re not worthy,” one began.

“To be in the presence,” the other continued.

“Of such greatness …”

“Of so much awe-inspiring …”

“Prankdomness …”

“We are your humble servants,” they finished together.

Suddenly, the two paused in mid-bow, looked at each other, nodded and bolted from the Hall.
“What in the world?” Moony asked.

“Now that was just plain weird,” Sirius agreed. Turning to the others at the table, he asked, quite seriously. “Are those two alright?”

“I expect so,” Harry replied. “They’re like that quite often.”

“Remember that time that they were bowing to you like that last year, Harry?” Neville grinned.

“Well, I did accidentally set an owl on Ron’s pet rat at the time,” Harry replied.

Both Remus and Sirius suddenly sported identical looks of pure glee and savagery.

“No more than that rat deserved,” Sirius remarked.

“Lord Black?” Harry asked, changing the topic.

“Yeah, between Moony badgering me and then Professor McGonagall and Madam Bones getting on my case, I wasn’t given much option,” Sirius scowled. “I’ve got my first Wizengamot session on Monday.”

“So what are Gryffindor’s chances against Hufflepuff in today’s game?” Remus asked, obviously changing the topic.

Quidditch talk dominated the table for the next little while, only to be interrupted by the return of the twins. As soon as they were once more in the presence of their heroes, they dropped to their knees.

“We return to you, O Great Marauders,” Fred said.

“Property that rightfully belongs to you,” George finished.

“Well, I’ll be,” Sirius breathed staring at the blank piece of old parchment that George held out to him. “I haven’t seen that in years. I was sure that Filch’d destroyed it back in our sixth year.”

“Where’d you find it?” Remus asked, his eyes also glued to the parchment.

“Nicked it, didn’t we,” George grinned.

“From Filch’s Office back in first year,” Fred elaborated.

“But what is it?” Harry asked, intrigued with the way that his godfather and uncle were acting.

“That, my good Harry, is the secret of our success,” Fred told him.

After laying the parchment of the table, Sirius and Remus shared a nod before both touched it with their wands.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” they intoned.

Instantly, black ink began spreading out from the point of their wands. Lines and dots with little moving labels began to appear. Across the table, Hermione gasped.

“Is that a map of Hogwarts?” she breathed.

“Certainly is,” Sirius grinned before turning the map so that everyone could see its title.

“Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers are
“This shows every passageway, every room in Hogwarts that we discovered while we were going to school here,” Remus explained. “It’s also tied into the Castle’s wards so that it shows where everyone is at any given moment.”

“That’s incredible!” Hermione breathed.

Harry, though, found himself focussed in on a single word of the title. Slowly, he extended a shaky hand to trace that word with a finger.

“Dad,” he breathed.

Fred and George were staring between him and each other. “Your dad was Prongs?”

All Harry could do was nod.

“I wish that you’d told us,” Fred said. “We would have given it to you straight away.”

Sirius pushed the map to him. “Here. It’s yours now, Pup. Use it well. To blank it out, simply say ‘Mischief Managed’.”

It was a good thing that he demonstrated how it was done, for, seconds later, Oliver Wood marched over and grabbed a shoulder of each Weasley Twin.

“Time to go, boys. We’ve got a game to win!”

-oOoOo-

The seven Gryffindors were lined up opposite their Hufflepuff counterparts. In between them, Madam Hooch had one foot resting on the chest that held the balls ready for the game as she gave both teams a stern talking to about the standards of play that she expected to see.

Having heard it all before, Harry let his gaze wander. The stands were all filled with Quidditch fanatics. Lion red and gold and Badger yellow and black dominated the stands. The Ravenclaws seemed to be fairly evenly divided upon who they were supporting with a decent smattering of both sets of colours sprinkled throughout their stands. The Slytherins, on the other hand, would be supporting Hufflepuff, purely on principle. Any team that went up against the Lions was always going to get their support.

Taking a more careful look, Harry searched the Gryffindor stands. Finally, he found who he was looking for: Sirius and Remus were up in the very top row. His godfather had a set of omnioculars around his neck, ready to track all the action. Remus was sitting beside him, animatedly looking up at and chatting with Hagrid.

Around his godfather and uncle, Harry picked out Hermione, Neville, Dean, Seamus and Ron. Just in front of them, sat Ron’s little sister, Ginny. Harry frowned as he realised what was missing from that particular spot. There were no flashes of light or great clouds of purple smoke. Obviously, Colin wasn’t sitting with Ginny for this match.

“And it seems that we have an unexpected visitor to the pitch,” Lee Jordan’s voice echoed around the ground from the announcer’s box.

Spinning around, Harry saw Professor McGonagall striding purposefully across the grass towards them. Her face was set and her lips were thinner than Harry’d ever seen. An ominous feeling swept
over him.

“I’m sorry, Rolanda,” Professor McGonagall said to her fellow professor before turning to address the crowd. She pointed her wand at her own throat, muttering a *sonorous* charm on herself.

“I’m afraid that today’s match has been cancelled.”

Shouts of outrage rained down on the professor’s head, along with dozens of cries of “why?”

With a sigh, Professor McGonagall answered them. “There has been another attack. Another triple attack.” After this, she was forced to raise her voice over the babble that broke out. “Silence! Thank you. Each House will be led straight to your common rooms. You will go under the direction of your Prefects and your Head of House. Do not go anywhere on your own! This is for your own safety.”

“Why don’t you get the aurors to just arrest Potter now?” a lone voice rang out from the Slytherin stands.

“Yeah, we all know it was him,” a second voice called.

“He probably just wanted to show off for his mass-murdering scum of a godfather!” a third voice yelled, this time from the opposite side of the pitch.

Unfortunately, with over half of the school now joining in in accusing Harry of being the one responsible, it was impossible to identify who was the most vocal.

Harry took a small half-step backwards to try to escape the hundreds of eyes staring at him, willing him to just give himself up. He took a second. Then a third and suddenly he was running. He pelted across the grass and into the tunnel back towards the change-rooms. Insults and accusations rang in his ears and it was all that he could do to stop the tears from falling.

“THAT IS ENOUGH!” Professor McGonagall’s voice bellowed from behind him before being cut off as the door to the Gryffindor change-rooms slammed shut behind him.

In a daze, Harry scuttled across the floor, jerked open a cleaning cupboard at the other end and flung himself inside. Only then did he let the tears finally come.

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“Is this the sort of attitude that my godson’s had to put up with all year?” Sirius roared, his fists on Dumbledore’s desk as he leant over it, staring at the Headmaster. “Being yelled at and hounded by the entire school? I know that he said that it was bad, but I never imagined *this*!”

“His parseltongue abilities have gone against the boy,” Dumbledore said mildly.

“And what have you done to stop that kind of thought?” Sirius shot back. “You know as well as I do that, while it’s an ability that a lot of dark wizards have had, it does not make someone ‘dark’.”

“I did explain all of that to the student body,” Dumbledore stated, his eyes twinkling away.

“Only after I made you,” Minerva growled. “You were happy to let the boy suffer through it to ‘help him mature’, I think it was.”

“I’ve half a mind to take Harry out of the school right now,” Sirius threatened.

“And yet, sadly, you are unable to. That decision resides with his magical guardian,” Dumbledore stated.
Sirius spun around, running a hand through his hair in exasperation even as he shared a knowing smirk with both Remus and Minerva. If he actually thought that it’d do any good, he’d show their hand now and take Harry home. Unfortunately, though, the boy needed his education and Hogwarts was the only magical school in Britain.

“How long until the mandrakes are ready to make the restoration draught?” Remus asked.

“Madam Sprout assures me that they’ll be fully mature within the month,” Dumbledore replied.

“And then hopefully one of those that were petrified can tell us all what’s been attacking them,” Minerva sighed.

“And Harry’ll stop being blamed for it,” Sirius put in.

“It’s a pity that the film from those two cameras were fried,” Remus stated, picking up first the ruined remains of Colin’s and then Damien’s camera from the side table where they’d been placed.

“What puzzles me is why Miss Lovegood was holding that mirror,” Minerva said as she came to stare down at the cameras herself.

“Before too long we’ll be able to ask her ourselves,” Dumbledore replied.

“Yeah, but will Harry last that long?” Sirius asked, whirling back on the Headmaster. “I’ve never seen a crowd that riled up at a single student before. I’d lay odds that Harry’ll be fighting off hexes and jinxes left, right and centre every time that he walks down a corridor.”

“And there were Gryffindors mixed in with those louts yelling at him,” Remus added. “I don’t know that he’s even safe in his own bed.”

“None of my cubs will do anything untoward,” Minerva stated, her eyes a fiery steel. “You have my word on that!”

After a brief shared look, Sirius and Remus nodded. Both then turned to regard the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

“I shall speak to the school at dinner this evening,” Dumbledore finally said. “Anyone taking justice into their own hands will find themselves with the loss of House points, multiple detentions and a personal lecture by me.”

“Alright. We’ll live with that for now,” Sirius finally said. “But if there’s just one attack on Harry, we’ll be back and he’ll be leaving with us.

-oOoOo-

“I sure hope that we’re doing the right thing, leaving him here,” Sirius remarked as he, Remus and Minerva walked towards the school gates.

It was nearly dark and the shadows from the Forbidden Forest were long on the ground, giving a decided chill to the air. They’d spent the majority of the day sitting with Harry, calming him down and talking through strategies to help him keep safe if he felt threatened. He now knew to either hide himself away, to run, to find the closest professor or even to find the closest auror. And to never, ever go anywhere alone. Hermione and Neville had been particularly insistent on that last point.

“Don’t worry, I’ll watch out for him,” Minerva assured the two men.
Remus had been fighting his inner wolf all day and his emotions were raw. One of his pack was in danger and all he wanted to do was to tear that danger limb from limb.

“While I know that he’s got his friends,” he said, “I’m loathe to leave him here.”

“It comes down to how soon we want to play our hand and tell Dumbledore that he hasn’t been Harry’s guardian since Christmas,” Minerva replied. “I still think that the longer we can leave it, the greater impact it’s going to have when we need to use it.”

“Just so long as I’m there to see the old man’s face when he finds out,” Sirius grinned evilly.
Chapter 32

Auror John Robards sighed as he lent against the stone wall. As expected, the corridor in both directions was deserted. As it would continue to be for the next twenty minutes or so. Then the current lesson would be over and dozens of Hogwarts students would come pouring either out of the classroom opposite or would appear from either end of the corridor heading towards their next class.

Surveillance and protection duty was never much fun. He’d done it before, usually for a businessman or a worker from the Ministry or that one time where he was assigned to a member of the Wizengamot. Each one of those times had been so much easier. Follow his assignee around from place to place, wait untold hours while the assignee did whatever it was that they did and then escort them home for the night where the night shift would take over.

Admittedly, his current assignment wasn’t much different. He still was expected to follow his assignee around, escort them where they needed to go while keeping an eye out for trouble and then escort them back to their ‘home’ at the end of the day. But doing so at Hogwarts where there were hundreds of people intent on making his assignees’ life miserable wasn’t easy. Not by a long shot.

He’d lost count of the number of shield charms that he’d had to erect to block hexes or jinxs and even one or two curses. Once or twice, he’d even had to erect his shield to stop the hexes that his assignee had sent at his tormentors. The verbal sparring and bullying that he’d heard hissed or yelled at the boy had staggered him. There was always at least one when he was moving between classes, and anything up to a dozen at non class times.

A bell sounded and Robards shot to alert status. Giving his hand a shake, he made sure that his sleeve wouldn’t foul up his wand if he needed to snap it into his hand from his wrist holster at a moment’s notice. Suddenly, the classroom door slammed open and students in either red-trimmed robes or green-trimmed robes came streaming out of it.

He searched for the distinctive messy black hair and round glasses of the Boy-Who-Lived. Locking onto him, he began systematically sweeping the crowds as he turned to follow the boy. A number of Slytherins gave Potter murderous looks, none more vile than the one directed at him by the Malfoy boy.

As he strode down the corridor, he still couldn’t make up his mind whether to thank his boss or to curse her into oblivion. When Madam Bones, the head of the DMLE had assigned him the task of protecting Harry Potter for the next month, he’d been the proudest auror in the department. Having this assignment on his resume was going to do wonders for him. Either that, he now decided after two and a half weeks, or send him bald from tearing out his own hair or straight to St. Mungo’s with a stomach ulcer.

A small group of students surrounded Potter and his two ever-present friends and Robards sped up, ready for whatever action might be required. The three of them, he noted, wore the green-trim of Slytherin, sending him into higher alert, despite the fact that they were all girls. He saw the boy smile at the newcomers and he relaxed slightly. He noted that he’d seen these three with the boy before. In fact, he remembered sending in a report about them on his second day. They and their families had been investigated and declared to be on Potter’s ‘safe list’.

A sudden movement from a cross-corridor caught Robards’ attention and he was moving before he’d even noted the raised wand.

Snapping his arm down, his wand shot out into his hand. Half a second later, his protego spell lit up
in front of the group of six. With a slight *clang* a bright yellow spell bounced off and into the nearby wall. Before a second spell could be launched, Robards dropped the shield and swung into action. An *expelliarmus*, *stupefy* and *incarcerous* later, and the seventh year Slytherin was disarmed, unconscious and bound, awaiting the displeasure of the closest professor.

A single look was enough to ensure him that Potter and his friends were all unharmed. With a nod of thanks, Potter led his friends away. Robards, though, was left with a mess to clean up, not to mention another report to write up.

He couldn’t wait until this assignment was finished. Ten more days. He’d been assured that that’s when the mandrakes would be ready to be made into the required potion and everything would be over and done with.

-oOoOo-

Harry waited in the shadows for the nod that he was positive would come. Moments later, he wasn’t disappointed. Auror Robards slipped out from behind the suit of armour, nodded once, before crossing the hallway, slipping into the shadowed niche and disillusioning himself.

Taking one last look around to ensure that he was alone, Harry slipped in behind the suit of armour that Robards had just emerged from. Before him was an old wooden door. Pushing it open, he let the tension and worry fall away, just as it did every time that he came to this most secret place.

“Hermione!” he exclaimed, clutching one hand to his chest in his shock.

Never before had he entered his secret cupboard to find someone in there before him. In fact, only once before had anyone ever been there apart from him and that time had been the time that Hermione had first learnt of his hiding place.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, staring at the girl seated on his coil of rope, books, parchment, ink and quills spread out around her.

“It’s simple, Harry,” she replied, looking up at him with a very self-satisfied smirk on her face. “I’m doing my homework.”

Harry’s eyes darted around the small space, making sure that there weren’t any others hiding in there waiting to surprise him.

“Why?” he asked suspiciously. “I mean, why here? Shouldn’t you be up in the library or the common room or something?”

“Well, normally, yes, Harry, I would be. But you see there’s something in all of those places that I don’t have there,” she replied.

“What’s that?” he asked as he closed the door behind him.

“My study partner, of course,” she stated as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“What?” he asked, confused.

“My study partner,” she repeated. “I remember being promised, actually, right here in this very room, that I’d always have a study partner and I haven’t had him for weeks now. So I decided that if he wasn’t going to come to me, then I’d go to him.”

Slowly, Harry sank to the floor across from her, guilt eating away at his conscience.
“It was just easier to come down here, Hermione. No one wanted to be around me, you know what
the whole school’s been like and I thought that if I was down here, then you could be with your
other friends,” he tried to explain.

“Harry,” she said, her chocolate brown eyes staring intently into his own green ones, “you are my
best friend. If those other idiots want to blame you simply because they’re scared and don’t know
what to do, then that’s their problem. I’m not going to put up with listening to them lash out at you
for something that you’re not responsible for.”

Overwhelmed, he dropped his head.

“Thanks, Hermione,” he whispered, his voice cracking on his emotions, “You’re my best friend too,
you know. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Now, shall we get to work?” she asked, the smile clear in her voice. “I’ve been working on my
Transfiguration assignment, but we can do the charms essay if you prefer.”

“No, Transfiguration’ll be fine,” he replied, “I’ve already made a start on it and it’d be good to finish
it up and get it out of the way.”

Reaching across, he dragged the old upturned bucket towards him to use as a desk before reaching
into his bag for what he’d need. Looking up, he could see that Hermione was already back at work,
her head buried in a book as she looked for whatever reference that she might need. He smiled at his
best friend, his heart suddenly feeling a little lighter.

-oOoOo-

A sudden flash of red light whipped past Harry’s nose, making him jerk back in surprise. Beside
him, though, Hermione wasn’t so lucky. With a soft oof she was spun around before crumpling to
the ground.

“Potter! Get down!” the deep voice of Robards bellowed before a sharp shove sent him out of the
way of a second spell, this one deep blue.

Harry sprawled forwards onto his hands and knees before whipping around.

“Hermione!” he cried, seeing her prostrate form.

With a desperate lunge he dove forward to cover her body with his own in the hope of protecting her
from the spells flying around above them.

Robards, for his part, was in full auror assault mode. He’d identified three assailants, all tall, most
likely sixth or seventh year students, all wearing plain black robes, their House colours stripped away
from them. His wand flickered to life in his hand as he shielded a variety of spells. Most he
recognised as being simple stunners or low threatening spells – ones that would put a person in the
Hospital Wing without permanent damage.

Flicking aside a stunner aimed at his head, he winced as he saw it rebound into the undefended
Longbottom boy. With two students already down, others fleeing and his primary still in immediate
danger, Robards surged into full attack mode.

Sending a stream of silent stupifys at the three assailants, he grinned as they backed up and spun
away. Spinning around, he gave once last check on Potter before moving away, putting a small
amount of distance between the three on the floor and himself.
Another string of curses, these a combination of stunners and *incarcerous*, made sure that the three had their attention strictly on him. Thick ropes impacted with one on the extreme left of the corridor, binding him tightly before he toppled to the floor, out of the fight.

Seeing their comrade taken out, the remaining two bellowed angrily before going back on the offensive, causing Robards to back-step quickly as he attempted to shield himself. Their cockiness was always going to be their undoing, though, especially against a fully trained auror. Robards absorbed their curses, letting them tire themselves, waiting for that instant of mistake.

And when it came, he pounced. Within seconds, the large black haired one was down, stunned out of the fight and the last was on the run. Taking careful aim, Robards sent a flurry of stunners only to see the boy jerk unexpectedly to the right just before impact and disappear into a hidden passageway.

“I’ll be right back!” Robards bellowed at Potter before taking off at a run.

Harry had watched the fight, amazed. He’d seen how fast the auror’s wandwork was, as well as the number of spells that were being used. One spell seemed to flow immediately into the next. *This* was what Remus had been talking about in his Defence tutorials, the ability to adapt and flow, knowing how spells could be joined together. A fire was kindled in Harry right then. He wanted to be able to do that too and he silently vowed to practise until it became second nature to him.

At Robards shout, Harry turned his attention to Hermione and Neville. Both had been hit with simple stunners and he was glad that neither one had been knocked into one of the stone walls when they’d been hit. He checked their breathing, sighing in relief as he realised that were fine. Madam Pomphrey would have them up and about within seconds.

“Potter!”

Harry looked up from where he was pulling Hermione’s head into his lap to see a familiar face.

“Lisa. Are you alright? You weren’t hurt in any of that, were you?” he asked.

Suddenly, her wand was pulled from her robes and levelled at him.

“Get up!” she demanded.

Slowly, Harry set Hermione aside so that he could get to his feet. All the while he stared into Lisa’s eyes. There was something immensely wrong with her – he could see it. Her brown eyes were normally full of life and suppressed laughter. Now, though, they were dull, almost dead-looking.

Knowing that he had to do something, he appeared to stumble as he got to his feet. Snapping his wrist down, his wand shot into his hand.

“*Expelliarmus! Incarcerous! Silenco!*”

His wand was torn from his grasp at her first spell. Ropes wound around his upper body, pinning his arms to his side at the second. The third spell, he knew, had just taken away any chance that he had to call for help.

Keeping her wand trained on him, Lisa circled around him before bending to retrieve his wand. After stowing it away inside her robes, she flicked her wand down the corridor.

“Get walking or these two die,” she instructed.

Forcing himself not to look at Hermione and Neville’s prone bodies, he complied. Anything to get
this non-Lisa away from his friends, away from the chance for her to hurt them.

Just before the intersection, her wand poked into his back.

“Stop here!”

Turning back to face her, Harry watched as those dull brown eyes focussed on the torch bracket just above their heads. Looking closely, he gasped as he saw a tiny snake etched into the metal

“§Open§,” Lisa hissed.

Harry watched as the wall before them began to shimmer. Stones wiggled and ground together in a manner eerily reminiscent of the opening to Diagon Alley. Finally, an opening to a hidden passageway large enough for a single person stood before them.

“Get in,” Lisa instructed.

With a nervous glance between his captor and the black tunnel before him, Harry took a last deep breath before obeying.

-oOoOo-

Grumbling under his breath, Auror Robards stalked back up the corridor. Behind him floated the unconscious and bound body of the third student who’d had the audacity to attack Potter. It’d been a short pursuit – the boy hadn’t even made it out of the passageway that he’d ducked into before Robards had subdued him.

Levitating the unconscious boy onto the ground against the wall, he moved the first two into position beside him while making sure that they were both bound and still knocked out. Only then did he turn to check out his charge.

Potter’s two friends still lay strewn on the ground where they’d fallen but of Potter, there was no sign. Surging to his feet, he strode down the corridor in search of the boy. A low grating sound spun him around. His eyes bulged even as his wand snapped up, but he was too late.

He watched as a bound Potter was forced at wandpoint into another secret passageway by a blue-trimmed girl. A single step was as far as he got before the wall closed up behind the pair.

Robards raced after them, only to come face to face with the rough stone wall and absolutely no clue in sight for how to open the passageway back up. Slamming his fists into the wall, he growled his frustration.

Madam Bones was not going to be pleased.
Harry slumped against the cold stone pillar at his back. Before him, Lisa Turpin or at least Lisa’s body, worked intently at preparing for what Harry could only assume was some sort of dark ritual. And there was nothing that he could do to stop it.

The trek that they had made down the dark passageway not so long ago had quickly turned into a mind-numbing walk. They’d walked for what felt like hours, first on hard stone floors, and then along the cold, dank, slimy pipes. Ever deeper into the castle and then into the bowels of the earth, Harry had been forced at wandpoint. Any time that he started to slow down due to tiredness, a sharp poke between the shoulder blades had set him moving once again.

With his arms bound tightly to his body, Harry’d found it impossible to brace himself on the uneven ground and more than once, he’d slipped. Every fall coated him in a dark green slime that smelled absolutely feral. Even now, trussed up far from the end of the last pipe, he could still smell that rank odour embedded into his clothes.

When at last the pipes had disgorged the two of them, Harry’d found that they were in a large earthen passageway. Wisps of roots hung from the ceiling, while underfoot, the ground crunched with every step. It was only from one of his many falls that he’d found out what it was that he’d been stepping on: bones. Tiny bones and skulls of rats and animals of all descriptions.

Rounding a bend, had appeared a sickly green skin of something just inside the reach of Lisa’s wandlight. Whatever had left the skin, and Harry’d desperately hoped that it wasn’t a snake like it looked like, was huge. The discarded skin was easily twenty feet long and wide enough that, if they’d so desired, they could have walked inside it.

Not long after passing the skin, Harry’d been pulled up in front of an enormous door. It was made from some gleaming silver metal and was covered with intricate designs of snakes. Tiny red and green gems were set in place for the eyes of the many serpents.

“§Open§,” Lisa had hissed.

Immediately, the door swung outwards. There was not a sound as it moved – no grating as it passed over the ground, no squeak of hinges. Nothing except the silent intimidating movement of the immense door.

With a jab from her wand, Lisa had forced Harry forward.

Inside was a gigantic chamber that put the Great Hall to shame. Overhead, the ceiling towered away into darkness. Pillars dotted the area, stretching high above. Numerous patches of water stretched away to either side, giving off a damp, mildewy smell. As they’d walked forward, dozens of torches flared into life, but still Harry hadn’t been able to see how wide the Chamber actually was.

After a couple of minutes of walking, they’d come to a larger cleared area dominated by a massive stone statue. The edifice was of a monkey-like man with a long, long beard that reached down to the hem of his stone robes.

A flick of Lisa’s wand had directed him to one side until he was backed up against the closest pillar. A second set of ropes emerged from her wand, wrapping around him, binding him tightly to the stone. Then, without a backwards look, she’d walked away.

Now, Harry watched mesmerised as Lisa pulled a small black book out of the pockets of her robe
and placed it on the ground before the statue. It looked familiar and he frowned, trying to tease the
information from his mind.

Finally, he found it and image after image swam before him.

Lisa offering the book to Luna Lovegood in the Great Hall. Luna with that very book in her hand in
the library as she debated with it, a quill poised above it. Luna wandering aimlessly down a corridor
at night laughing away at something that she’d read. A tall, aristocratic man, Lucius Malfoy, he
suddenly realised, giving Luna the book outside of Flourish and Blotts in Diagon Alley. Luna,
mentioning that the diary belonged to Tom and that she’d tried to clean it for him.

Harry gasped as he realised how many different people had been in possession of that one little book
in a year. Whatever it was, he had no doubt that there was something special about it.

During this time, Lisa hadn’t been idle. Harry’d watched, horrified, as she’d used her wand to make
a deep cut in her finger. Then, using the blood pouring from her, she’d begun drawing strange
designs in a complicated pattern around the book. From the distance that he was watching from, it
was hard for Harry to make them out. The best that he could come up with was that they were runes
of some kind.

When at last Lisa stood up once more and walked off to one side, Harry saw that the runes now
formed a distinctive pentagram, with the book laying at its centre.

If he thought that it would do any good, Harry’d try calling out to Lisa again, to ask her what was
going on, but he’d learnt that that was pointless. He’d tried talking to her numerous times during their
long trek down here but every time he was met with silence. In the end, he’d simply given up.

Unexpectedly, Lisa raised her left hand, pointing it to a spot on the opposite side of the pentagram
from where she stood. At the same time, she pointed her wand at the closest point of the star. Then,
she began chanting in a voice that was too low for Harry to make out.

Flashes of brilliant purple magic arced between her wand and the pentagram. With every flash a rune
would begin to glow. By the time the fourth rune had lit up, the first was shining with a bright yellow
light.

On and on Lisa chanted. Wave after wave of magic was cast forth. Rune after rune charged with
power until Harry was left squinting in the brilliant light. When the last rune, the one closest to where
she was pointing with her left hand was finally fully charged, a great burst of red magic exploded,
bathing the entire area in light.

Scrunching his eyes up, Harry whipped his head away. At the same time, his scar exploded with a
pain so intense, that he screamed in agony. His throat felt raw and tears streamed down his face.
Finally, heaving in great gasps of air, he gritted his teeth against the pain and forced his feet under
him so that he was no longer being simply held upright by the ropes that bound him to the pillar.

Through the spots that still danced in his eyes, he saw that the runes pulsed with power around the
book, although now they were much dimmer. Lisa had completely collapsed into a heap onto the
ground, but neither of these things held Harry’s attention.

No, what had him enthralled was the presence of ghost-like figure of a boy. He was older than
Harry, maybe sixteen or seventeen judging by his height and wearing a Hogwarts uniform. Harry
frowned, trying to piece together what was different through the throbbing pain in his head when it
finally came to him: this was an old style uniform. Harry wasn’t the best at fashion, in fact, he’d
consider his knowledge of clothing down right abysmal, but even he could tell that this ghost? was
wearing a uniform decades out of date.

The ghost seemed immensely proud of itself. He was peering intently at his hands, feeling his face and looking down his body. Harry gasped as, with every passing minute, the ghost became that slightest bit more solid as if he was passing from one realm to join this one.

Finally having finished examining himself, the figure walked over to where Lisa lay and plucked her wand out of her hand.

Then, with a feral grin on his face, he turned to Harry.

“Ah, Harry Potter, we meet at last. Or should that perhaps be again? I guess it depends on your perspective,” the older boy said.

“What? Who are you?” Harry gasped out through his gritted teeth.

“I must say that it’s taken longer than I would have liked to meet you face to face,” the older boy mused, ignoring Harry’s question.

Harry shook his head, trying to distract himself from the easy way that the boy twirled Lisa’s wand through his fingers. Whoever he was, Harry had no doubt that he was superb with a wand.

“Before we begin, I find that I must ask. What are nargles?” the boy asked, his face suddenly a mixture between curiosity and frustration.


“Hmm,” the boy frowned. “What about wrackspurts? No? Blibbering Humdingers? I thought that they were utter nonsense.”

“What are you going on about?” Harry asked, his frustration rising.

“The fool of a girl, Luna, wouldn’t stop her incessant chatter about those absurd creatures. She nearly drove me to complete distraction to the point that I nearly forgot what it was that I was hoping to achieve,” the boy frowned.

“Who are you?” Harry asked.

“Yes, I dare say it is time for the niceties to be observed.” Stepping back slightly, he swept an ironic bow. “Tom Riddle, at your service. You, of course, would know me by my real name, the name that I chose myself. Lord Voldemort!”

“What? Voldemort? You’ve got to be kidding me,” Harry shook his head.

“You doubt Lord Voldemort, the most powerful wizard in history?” he seethed.

“Yeah,” Harry replied and then stopped to think, “well, that’s not true. I don’t doubt Voldemort’s pretty powerful and everything. I guess I more doubt that you’re him.”

At the towering fury on the face before him, Harry continued.

“I mean, come on, I’ve seen Voldemort. Hell, I’ve fought Voldemort. Twice! Won too, when it comes right down to it, even if I couldn’t kill him off. And look at you, you’re a ghost. So, if you’re a ghost and Voldemort’s not dead, it stands to reason that you’re not him.”
“I. Am. Not. A. Ghost!” The shade growled, stepping closer with every word until he was toe to toe with the bound Harry. “I am so much more than a ghost and thanks to your little friend, there, soon I’ll be reborn, risen to once more reign over the magical world!”

“Yeah, sorry, not seeing it,” Harry stated, continuing with his hurried plan to keep the ghost-thing talking until either Lisa woke up or help arrived.

With a swirl of a transparent cloak, the older boy strode away. Suddenly, he whirled back.

“Perhaps a story is in order.” He glanced at Lisa’s prone body. “I do seem to have some time to kill before the body count starts to rise. How much do you know about Lord Voldemort?”

Harry shrugged as much as he could, bound the way that he was. “He’s a terrorist who gathered a bunch of thugs to go around stealing and killing and scaring people. He tried to take over magical Britain, but it seemed a tiny problem got in his way, destroying his body and scattering his followers.”

“And what tiny problem was that?” the older boy asked lightly.

“Me. Voldemort tried to kill me as a baby and he couldn’t do it. So much for the ‘most powerful wizard in history’!”

The older boy’s face darkened in anger.

“You know only the history written in your own school books,” he sneered. “Now hear the true story of Lord Voldemort!

“Like you, I was once a student here and like you, Harry Potter, I was an orphan. My witch of a mother died giving birth to me while my muggle of father abandoned me before I was even born. I was forced to grow up in a disgusting muggle orphanage. All I had were my parents’ names: ‘Tom’ after my father, ‘Marvolo’ after my mother’s father and my dirty father’s last name ‘Riddle’.

“But I soon realised that I had more than that. I had power. Real power. Unmatched power. I was fawned over and given all that I deserved – knowledge and skills that surpassed all others. Only that muggle-loving fool Dumbledore was smart enough to keep an eye on me.

“While I was here at Hogwarts, I delved deeper into her secrets than any other. I devoured the restricted section until I knew things that would make you sick just at the very thought of it. I taught myself how to go further into immortality than any other had ever gone before. And in my ultimate wisdom, I left this diary behind.”

Riddle paused here and pointed at the diary sitting innocently in the centre of the pentagram.

“I knew that one day it could be used to continue my glorious work, the work of my illustrious ancestor – Salazar Slytherin. Within its very pages was the means to unleash the horrors that I had found and tamed hidden in the Chamber of Secrets.

“And thanks to me and a couple of simple-minded foolish girls, my work is once more continuing!”

“Alright, say I believe that you’re Voldemort. It’s a nice story and all …” Harry began before Riddle cut him off with a backhanded wave of his wand that felt as though he’d just been punched in the jaw.

“You still doubt?” he roared.
With quick, precise movements, he began writing fiery letters into the air. Letters that quickly spelled out his name – TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE. And then, after a glare to make sure that Harry was watching, he gave his wand one elaborate swish. Immediately the letters hanging in the air began to circle around each other until they formed new words.

I AM LORD VELDEMORT

“Alright, alright, I believe you. But what does that all have to do with Lisa and Luna?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowed.

“The answer to that is quite simple really,” Riddle replied, as he paced backward and forwards. “The way to activate the diary is to write in it. And by writing in it, one pours a part of their soul into it. Into me. Pour enough of your soul and I am given new life.

“Unfortunately, it was that idiotic Luna girl that found my diary first and even though she was pouring her soul into me, her chaotic ramblings weren’t … conducive … to a clean transfer. And then she had the audacity to attempt to remove my soul from the book. Of course, I had to convince her to abandon the diary after that.

“Fortunately, another found my diary, one much more useful to me. She was able to tell me all kinds of interesting facts. About you, Harry Potter. Of the Gryffindor hero. The one who fought and supposedly defeated Lord Voldemort as a baby and again last year when a teacher was being possessed. I heard how you were a parselmouth, like I am – an ability that I thought had died out in the British Isles decades ago. And then I heard that you were now being proclaimed as the Heir of Slytherin. Of course, I couldn’t have that.”

Riddle paced away to stare down at Lisa’s body while he continued to talk.

“Normally, it’d take many months for a person to pour enough of their soul into the diary to give me enough life to leave its confines. But my need to meet you was greater than my patience in this. So I had Lisa bring you down here and use a little known ritual on the diary. Right now, her very soul, her life essence is being poured into the diary and straight into me. In a matter of hours, she will be dead and I will live again.”

Suddenly, he turned back to Harry.

“So you see, Harry Potter, I am indeed Lord Voldemort and once I have reunited with whatever form you have left the older me in, I shall be unstoppable and rule over all of magical Britain.”

“You really do think a lot of yourself, don’t you,” Harry asked. “Like to talk too. I’m surprised that no one killed you off before you tried to kill me as a baby. I should think that it’d be incredibly easy. Simply wait until you start rambling on and curse you when you least expect it.”

Riddle threw back his head and laughed.

“Your ego knows no bounds, Harry Potter. It shall almost be a pity to have to kill you. Almost. But let’s not make things too easy.”

With a sudden downward flash of the wand in his hand, the ropes binding Harry were cut, dropping him to the floor.

Ignoring him, Riddle turned to face the statue of his ancestor.

“§Speak to me, Salazar, Greatest of the Hogwarts Four §!”
Immediately, a great grinding noise echoed through the Chamber. Lifting his head, Harry watched as the statue’s mouth slowly opened. Movement inside the mouth sent his eyes wide as panic flew through him. He had no idea what was coming, but one thing he was sure of was that whatever it was, he was not going to like it.

“§Lid your eyes, precious one!” Riddle commanded.

A snake, the likes of which Harry could never have imagined, slowly emerged from the statue. He was sure that every metre of sickly green skin would be its last, however it simply kept coming. A great slap sounded as the front of the snake landed on the stone floor beside Riddle, the end of its tail still not in sight.

“§I have prey for you, precious one. The boy before you is all yours. Keep your second lids down, though, we wouldn’t want your fun to be curtailed too soon§,” Riddle instructed.

At his words, the snake’s head whipped around focussing in on Harry. He stared into the dull yellow eyes that, even lidded, he was sure were staring straight back at him.

“Run Harry Potter! Run to your death for none can escape the great basilisk!” Riddle mocked before throwing his head back and laughing.

Harry wasted no time following the megalomaniac’s instructions.

Pushing himself to his feet, he took off, slipping and sliding as he tried to gain traction. Behind him, he could hear the slither of the basilisk. Hisses sounded almost in his ear and he ran like never before.

Instinctively, he dodged right, ducking behind a pillar. A crash and the crumble of stones behind him told him that he’d guessed right. The basilisk had just smashed its snout into the stone floor where he’d been seconds before.

Taking off, he ran even faster, losing himself in amongst the pillars and half-light. His lungs burned but he pressed on, trying desperately to evade the snake. Twice more in quick succession he only just managed to dodge the basilisk’s strike.

Doubling back, thinking that he could confuse it, Harry ran a mistake. He’d forgotten how long the basilisk was. Sensing his ploy, the snake whipped his tail out, catching him in his ribs and sending him flying through the air. He came down hard on the stone floor before rolling over and over.

With barely a shake of his head, he was back up and running again. This time, though, he wasn’t as fast. He’d come down hard on his left knee and fire was shooting up his leg. Realising that his limp was starting to slow him down, Harry looked backwards and forwards. And then he saw it.

He’d run so far in the Chamber that one of the far walls had finally come into sight. And there, not fifteen metres away, was a deep crack in the wall. Risking a glance behind him, he judged that he could make it.

The crack was barely wider than he was but nearly twice as tall. Hearing the snakes’ slither approaching fast, Harry dived and scuttled the last couple of metres on his hands and knees. Behind him, the snake ploughed headlong into the stone sending splinters flying and bringing visibility to near zero with the dust in the air.

Aiming to get as far from the deadly snake as possible, Harry scuttled deeper into the crack in the wall. Without warning, it opened out. He found himself in a circular cave large enough to be a small room. Looking around in the dim light, he noticed shapes that gave the appearance of a desk and a chair and something that looked like a spear propped up against the wall.
Rushing across the cave, Harry grabbed up the one thing that thought might give him a chance.

The spear, though, might not have been what it first appeared to be. The instant that his hands closed around it, a rush of warm power flowed through him, energising him. Wishing that he could see what it was that he was holding, he thought of *lumos*.

Immediately, the tip of the ‘spear’ lit up. Harry’s eyes were wide as he drank in the object in his hands. It was long, longer than he was, made of finely polished rowan. Two thirds of the way from its tip, intricate carvings wrapped around the staff until the wood flared out and wrapped around a large red gem.

Realising that the staff was acting like a wand would, with the way that the gem had lit up for him, he quickly decided to try a second spell.

“*Incarcerous!*” Harry intoned, only to see thick ropes shoot out of the end of the wand.

A fierce grin emerged as his eyes flickered back towards where the basilisk was still trying to bash its way in towards its prey.

Quickly, quietly, Harry limped back into the crack in the stone wall, the staff held out before him. When he judged that he was close enough, he stopped, waiting.

The basilisk must have been able to sense him as the pace at which it was bashing into the crack in the wall suddenly increased.

“*Diffindo!*” Harry roared, timing his spell with the snake’s next forward thrust.

A hissing shriek erupted as a long gash appeared along the edge of the snake’s mouth. Its mouth came open with its scream and Harry struck again.

“*Diffindo!*”

This one, aimed right at the roof of the snake’s mouth caused it to rear backwards in pain. Great spurts of green blood shot out of its mouth. In its fury, it lashed back at the one who’d hurt it.

“*Diffindo!*” Harry roared for the third time.

His aim was true, striking the exact spot in the snake’s mouth that he’d managed the last time.

This time, the basilisk coiled backwards on itself. Its body writhed and whirled around the ground, its shrieks of pain reaching a frequency that caused Harry to clamp his hands over his ears.

Finally, the snake rolled over one last time before becoming deathly still.

Cautiously, the staff held out before him, Harry crept forth. He eyed the basilisk carefully but there was no mistaking that it was dead. Its great yellow eyes had dimmed to lifelessness. Its mouth gaped open, blood pooling from the wound in its mouth. Harry stared at the rows and rows of teeth, some with specs of deadly poison glinting off of their tips.

On impulse, Harry used a forth cutting curse to knock out one of the basilisk’s teeth. This, he secreted away in his pocket, just in case.

Slipping from pillar to pillar, Harry made his way back towards where Riddle and Lisa were in front of the statue of Salazar Slytherin. Peering around the last pillar, he saw Riddle resting on his haunches, eyeing the comatose girl in front of him.
“Stupify!” Harry yelled, his staff pointing straight at Riddle’s back.

The red spell shot forward, straight through the ghost-like Riddle to impact with the stone floor beyond him.

Instantly, Riddle was on his feet, whirling around, an expression of wry amusement on his face.

“Perhaps in another hour your audacity may have served you well, Harry Potter, but as it is right now …” Riddle’s wand flashed in intricate patterns.

Harry felt his staff ripped from his hands. Instinctively, he threw himself away just as a vivid blue spell struck him in the shoulder. A scream of pain was torn from him as he felt his entire shoulder flare with intense pain. His left hand grasped at his right shoulder to feel the sticky sensation of blood pouring through his fingers and down his arm.

Seeing Riddle lowering his wand towards him once more, Harry rolled away, just in time to avoid the sickly yellow spell that impacted where his head had been moments before.

“Come now, Harry Potter, bow to your death,” Riddle mocked.

Harry refused to answer. His life depended upon him escaping Riddle’s spells, not on how well he could verbally spar with the ghost-like boy. Ghost-like. His brain latched on to the description as his eyes focussed on the object bringing Riddle to life.

Gathering his feet under him, Harry did the one thing that he hoped Riddle would least expect – he dove straight towards him. Rolling across the rough stone floor, Harry skidded into the runes drawn in Lisa’s blood.

The glow emanating from the ones that he landed on winked out, their power disturbed, but there still seemed to be more than enough to keep the transfer going.

“What …?” Riddle began.

But Harry didn’t give him time to finish. Letting go of his wounded shoulder, Harry pawed at his pocket until his hand closed around the smooth object therein. As quickly as he could, he reached high before slamming the tooth of the basilisk down into the diary.

Riddle screamed in terror as great spurts of black ink burst forth from the diary. A clatter announced Lisa’s wand dropping from his hand. Harry saw him take a single step forwards. That was enough of a threat for Harry. Once more, he brought the tooth high and stabbed it into the diary.

With one last piercing scream that echoed around the Chamber, Riddle faded away until, with a slight pop, he was gone. Immediately, the remaining runes lost their light, winking out to become smudges of blood on the ground.

A soft groan caught Harry’s attention and he scuttled across the ground.

“Lisa?”

The brown haired girl groaned as she lifted her head. Bleary brown eyes peered up at him.

“Harry? What’s going on? What happened? Where are we?”

Harry sighed, his head dropping in exhaustion. “It’s over, Lisa. It’s over.”
At long last, after what was probably hours, Harry and Lisa were at the final hurdle. In front of them, the stone wall started to shiver before each and every stone wiggled around and away to create an opening in the stone wall.

Leaning heavily on his staff on one side and with Lisa’s arm around him keeping him up on the other, Harry started forward. And immediately froze.

“Harry!” Sirius cried before bounding forwards towards him.

In the brief flash of time before his godfather reached him, Harry saw enough to realise that the corridor was filled nearly to overflowing with adults. Kneeling in front of him were a pair of men dressed in dark brown cargo pants and a buttoned shirt, their robes loose on their shoulders. Each of them had their wands in their hands, raised as if in the middle of an incantation.

Half a dozen red robes could only be aurors, the most prominent two being Auror Robards and Madam Bones. Professor Dumbledore looked to be in an animated discussion with three or four unknown others, while a knot of professors – McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick and Pomfrey – were clustered together against the far wall.

“Pup! What happened? Are you alright?” Sirius asked.

Harry knew that he must look a sight. He was covered in blood and slime; his robes, what was left of them, were ripped and torn; and he was wrapped in makeshift bandages. Once Lisa was recovered enough, she’d helped him to tear up his robe and wrap it around not only his wounded shoulder, but also his knee which he’d found had been cut quite badly.

“Let me through, Mister Black,” the no-nonsense voice of Madam Pomfrey commanded. “The boy obviously needs medical attention.”

“That’s her! She’s the one who kidnapped Potter!” Auror Robards accused in his deep voice.

Three red-robed aurors closed in on Lisa who began shrinking back behind Harry.

“Wait. It wasn’t her fault,” Harry told them quickly, “she was being possessed.”

“Possessed? Whatever do you mean, Harry?” Madam Bones asked quickly, staying her aurors with a single gesture.

“I think that this is neither the time nor the place, Madam Bones,” Dumbledore cut across Harry’s answer.

“I quite agree,” Madam Pomfrey stated as she waved her wand over Harry. “I need to get Mister Potter to the Hospital Wing.”

“Perhaps it would be better for all of you to return tomorrow after Harry has been patched up and had a chance to rest,” Dumbledore suggested in a tone that left no doubt that he expected to be obeyed.

“From what I’ve been hearing, this is now a DMLE matter, Headmaster,” Madam Bones stated.
“Students placed under the *imperius* curse in order to attack other students and to provide the means for a kidnapping to occur and now there’s the suggestion of a possession. No, neither I, nor my aurors, will be going anywhere until I get some answers.”

“The School Governors would also like to hear what has been happening here,” Lucius Malfoy intoned.

“Madam Pomfrey. Before you take these children to the Hospital Wing, I need to ask them one question,” Madam Bones stated. At the healer’s nod, she looked at Harry. “Is the school safe? Is whatever was petrifying students still on the loose?”

Harry gave a tight smile. “It’s okay, Madam Bones. I killed the basilisk.”

His statement was met with an uproar. Most adults stepped back, gasping in shock before trying to bombard the two teens with questions. Over it all, Harry made out Malfoy’s drawl as he sent accusation after question at Dumbledore.

Without even giving him an option, Madam Pomfrey conjured a pair of stretchers and bade Harry and Lisa to lie down. Then, with a quick flick and swish of her wand, she began levitating the two towards her Hospital Wing.

-oOoOo-

It was sometime later that Harry found himself sitting up in his hospital bed, surrounded by adults. In the background, Madam Pomfrey was muttering darkly to herself, annoyed that her insistence that the boy needed to take some dreamless sleep potion to allow his body a chance to rest and heal itself was being ignored for now.

And while Harry was tired, the fact that he was now cleaned and the vast majority of his cuts, scrapes and bruises had been treated had made a world of difference. His knee was still bandaged, this time with a clean white dressing, but he had been assured that by morning he wouldn’t even have a scar to show for his trouble there. His shoulder, though, had been a different matter.

When Madam Pomfrey had first eased away the matted mess of a robe that he’d been using as a make-shift bandage, she’d gasped before leaping into action. Just the action of pulling away the material had caused it be begin bleeding again and quite heavily at that. Not being able to stop himself, Harry’d taken a single look at the wound. That’d been more than enough to nearly make him vomit.

A long cut, deep enough for him to see the white of bone underneath the skin and muscle ran from his collarbone, across his shoulder and into his upper bicep. From the comments that Madam Pomfrey later made when she’d been talking to Sirius that he’d been able to overhear, he’d been lucky not to lose his whole arm. It also sounded as though he’d be lucky to be out of the Hospital Wing in time for the Leaving Feast and *that* was still ten days away.

With a sigh, he prepared himself for the coming interrogation.

Sirius stood over his left shoulder in what was clearly a very protective mood. In front of him stood Madam Bones with Auror Robards off to one side, a wad of parchment and a quill ready to take notes. Professor Dumbledore, eyes twinkling merrily away, was also there with Professors McGonagall and Flitwick sitting on the next bed over. Slightly behind Dumbledore, leading against the wall, looking like he was trying not to be noticed, was Professor Snape. And then there were the three School Governors, Lucius Malfoy, Madam Longbottom (who’d given him a small smile) and a third, a man that hadn’t been introduced at all.
“Mister Potter, are you ready to tell us what happened?” Madam Bones asked, almost gently.

At his nod, she asked, “I think it would be a good idea to start with you explaining your assertion that Miss Turpin was possessed.”

Harry reached across Sirius and grabbed up the remains of the diary. The black leather was marred by a massive hole in its centre as though a red hot poker had been shoved through it, charring the edge of the pages that it’d touched.

“It was this diary,” he began. “Voldemort used this to possess Lisa when she wrote in it and made her do things that she didn’t know that she was doing.”

“Are you saying that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Name has been in the school?” Madam Bones asked, concern clear in her voice.

“Yes. No,” Harry shook his head. “I got to see him and talk to him when he came out of the diary, but he looked like he was only sixteen or seventeen. And he didn’t know anything about what’d been going on since then apart from whatever Lisa, Luna and I told him.”

“I truly believe that this is not a discussion for so many people,” Dumbledore said quickly. “This knowledge needs to be kept strictly confidential. Perhaps it would be best if Harry told his tale to me first before we involve others.”

Madam Bones shot the Headmaster a look that clearly told him what she thought of that idea, before dismissing him and turning back to Harry.

“Let me check to make sure that I understand you correctly. You-Know-Who’s teenage mind was able to possess Miss Turpin when she wrote in the diary and cause her to do things that she ordinarily wouldn’t do without her even realising it?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, although when I was talking to him, he always used the word ‘soul’, not mind.”

Turning in her chair, Madam Bones addressed Auror Robards. “That would explain how those three students were placed under the imperius curse in order to distract you. I’d say that after some final interviews, those children will be free to go.”

At his acknowledging nod, Madam Bones turned back to Harry.

“Now that we’ve got that part sorted out, I think that it would be beneficial to hear the entire story from you, Harry. We already know that there were three students who attacked you to distract Auror Robards and that during the conflict, both Miss Granger and Mister Longbottom were stunned.”

Taking a deep breath, he began.

“After Auror Robards ran off, Lisa appeared. I could see that there was something wrong with her. Her eyes looked dull, as though she wasn’t really seeing me or something. She was pointing her wand at me and quickly disarmed me, bound me with ropes and silenced me so that I couldn’t even call out for help. Then she forced me down the corridor and into a hidden passageway.”

“How did she get it open?” Madam Bones asked. “We had two curse breakers working on it for over an hour and neither of them were having any luck.”

“It only opened by parseltongue,” Harry replied, now understanding who the two strange wizards had been that he’d seen when they’d first come back out.
“But Miss Turpin doesn’t speak parseltongue,” Professor Flitwick squeaked.

“I’d assume that she could do it because she was possessed at the time,” Professor Snape replied.

“Anyway, we walked for ages,” Harry continued, “down passageways and pipes until we reached the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.”

“It really exists?” an eager Professor McGonagall asked. “What’s it like?”

Harry gave his favourite professor a small smile. “The door’s huge and you need to be able to speak parseltongue to get it open as well. Inside, the Chamber’s massive. Much bigger than the Great Hall. It’s really dark, even with all of the torches around it. There’s dozens and dozens of huge stone columns and patches of water everywhere. And at the very end is a huge stone statue of Salazar Slytherin.”

“Indeed? I was under the impression that no images of Slytherin have survived to this time. I would be curious to see that,” Professor Snape mentioned.

“When we got there, Lisa tied me to one of the pillars before she began some sort of ritual. She placed the diary on the ground and then used her wand to cut her finger so that she could draw a bunch of runes around it in a pentagram pattern. And then she started to chant something, but I couldn’t hear what it was.

“Whatever it was that she did, it made her shoot magic from her wand into the closest rune. The magic got passed to each rune and once they were all charged, he appeared. Voldemort.”

Gasps escaped all those around as Sirius’ hand that had come to rest on Harry’s shoulder some time during his story suddenly clamped painfully.

“And then we talked.”

“What did he have to say?” Madam Bones asked.

“Once again, Madam Bones, I must implore you to leave off this line of questioning for now. The information that was imparted to young Harry may be of strategic value and shouldn’t be bandied around lightly,” Dumbledore stated forcefully.

Madam Bones looked around at each person present, her eyes narrowed. “I will have a magical oath from each of you before you leave this room not to divulge anything you are about to hear to anyone without my express permission. If you feel you are unable to give such an oath, you may leave now.”

When not one person moved, Madam Bones nodded to Harry to continue.

“He mostly talked about how he really was Lord Voldemort,” said Harry. “That’s probably because I kept saying that I didn’t believe him. He told me that he was an orphan like me, that his muggle dad had left his magical mum before she died giving birth to him. He went to school here where only Professor Dumbledore seemed wary of him.”

Every eye switched to the Headmaster with varying degrees of interest before turning back to Harry.

“In the end, it took him explaining his name to make me believe him.”

“His name? What do you mean?” Madam Bones asked.
In answer, Harry retrieved his wand from his nightstand and began writing in the air as Riddle had done as he explained.

“His first name is Tom, like his father. His middle name is Marvolo, after his mum’s father. And his last name is Riddle.”

Then, with a single swish of his wand, the letters rearranged themselves.

“Tom Marvolo Riddle is You-Know-Who? But there’s a Special Services Award to the school of his in the Trophy Room,” Professor McGonagall gasped.

Madam Bones’ nod to Auror Robards told Harry that that award was going to be under a fair bit of scrutiny later.

“After he explained who he was,” Harry continued, “he cut me loose and called for his pet basilisk to kill me.”

“How did you not die straight away?” Professor McGonagall asked. “The gaze of a basilisk is deadly.”

“Ah, but only if seen directly, Minerva” Dumbledore remarked. “If seen as a reflection, it merely petrifies.”

“And that explains all of the petrifications,” Madam Longbottom remarked. “None of those poor people saw the beast directly.”

“No,” Harry said slowly, his brain working overtime. “Lil, Crabbe and Goyle were looking at a window and would have only seen its reflection. Filch … Filch was looking into Mrs Norris’ eyes and Mrs Norris … there was water all over the floor! She saw the basilisk’s reflection in the water!”

“Well done, Mister Potter!” Professor Flitwick beamed. “Twenty points to Gryffindor for such excellent deductions.”

With a smile to the diminutive professor, Harry continued his story.

“As soon as the basilisk started coming, I ran. It nearly got me a bunch of times until I found a small passageway and room that the basilisk was too big to enter. That’s where I found the staff,” he said, indicating the rowan wizard staff propped up against the wall beside his bed. “I worked out that it could channel my magic like my wand so I used that to kill the basilisk.”

“But basilisk hide is impervious to magic,” Madam Bones frowned.

Harry shrugged. “I didn’t know that but it didn’t matter anyway. I used a couple of cutting curses inside its mouth. I think I managed to cut through to its brain and killed it that way.”

Sirius’ hand clapped his shoulder a couple of time and Harry looked up to see the pride clear on his face.

“After that, I tried to take out Riddle and rescue Lisa,” Harry told them all. “Riddle’d already said that Lisa would die once the soul and magic transfer was complete. But my spells didn’t work. They went straight through him. His spells, though, worked just fine. I realised that it was the diary giving him his power, so I decided to destroy that instead.”

“What did you use?” Madam Bones asked.
“A basilisk fang,” Harry replied. “When I stabbed the diary, it killed off Voldemort and Lisa woke up and we simply walked back out.”

“Absolutely amazing,” the third School Governor who still hadn’t been introduced to Harry stated.

“What I still don’t understand is how Miss Turpin came into the possession of You-Know-Who’s diary in the first place,” Madam Bones mused.

“I can answer that,” Harry told her, eliciting an eager look from the Head of the DMLE. “Lisa found the dairy after Luna Lovegood had tried to get Riddle’s soul out of it and had failed and thrown it away. *Luna* was given it by Mister Malfoy before school started in Diagon Alley.”

Both Madam Bones and Auror Robards stepped forward quickly, cutting off the beginnings of Malfoys sidle away from the group.

“Lucius Malfoy, I am placing you under arrest for the possession of a dark object. Specific charges will be laid, assuming that they warrant them, of course, after your questioning. Aurors?” Madam Bones announced.

At her declaration, two red-robed aurors appeared, relieved Mister Malfoy of his wand and snapped some magic-suppression cuffs on him.

Once they were gone, Madam Pomfrey stepped forward. “I think that Mister Potter has answered more than enough questions this evening. In fact, if he answers any more, the sun will be up and he will have talked the night away.”

“I quite agree,” Professor Dumbledore twinkled, “let us allow young Harry his rest for now.”

As the adults began dispersing, Harry saw Dumbledore step towards him, his hand outstretched. The old man’s hand had barely closed around the staff beside Harry’s bed before Sirius had reached across and snapped a large, muscly hand onto Dumbledore’s wrist.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he growled.

“It was my intention to keep this wonderful artefact somewhere safe for young Harry until he’s old enough to use it,” Dumbledore assured him.

“In case you weren’t listening before,” Sirius retorted. “He’s already proven that he’s old enough to use it. He used the bloody thing to kill a ruddy *basilisk*, for Merlin’s sake! One that had been stalking your halls! And you know the laws. He found it, it’s his.”

“I quite agree,” Madam Longbottom spoke up from where she stood at the end of Harry’s bed. “Now, Albus, I think that you need to come along with us. Mister Colpher and I have a few questions for you on the state of the school and most especially about how such a dark object found its way past Hogwart’s supposedly magnificent wards.”

Harry smirked at the fleeting expression of pain that crossed the Headmaster’s face.

“Don’t worry, Pup,” Sirius said as he settled into a comfortable-looking chair that he transfigured for himself. “I’m not going to go anywhere. You just take that potion that Madam Pomfrey left for you and rest. You’ve done more than enough and earned yourself a nice long sleep.”

With a nod and a smile to his godfather, Harry did as he’d been told, pulling the covers up as he settled further down into the bed.
Consciousness returned slowly to Harry. As he began to process where he was, his mind settled on two things. The first was a soft, warm pressure on his thigh. Whatever the weight was, it wasn’t overly heavy, so he wasn’t concerned. The second was that his hand was being held. It wasn’t tight or constricting, in fact, it felt nice, comforting.

As he opened his eyes, Harry lifted his head to peer down his body. A mass of bushy brown hair told him immediately who was with him. It was her head laying on his thigh, her hand holding his as he’d slept.

“Hermione?” he rasped.

Instantly her head shot up, her warm chocolate brown eyes finding his. Her smile lit up her face and she launched herself at him.

“Oh, Harry, I was so worried,” she voice muffled by his shoulder, “I woke up and you were gone and they said that you’d been taken and I didn’t know what to do. And then this morning they said that you’d been found but that you were badly hurt.”

Using his good hand, he gently stroked her hair.

“It’s okay, Hermione, everything’s okay now,” he said soothingly.

Pulling back, she intently searched his face. “Madam Pomfrey says that you’re going to be here for the next few days at least.”

He nodded, unsurprised. A small smile appeared as he watched her chew her bottom lip.

“Spit it out, Hermione,” he said gently as he reached over to retrieve his glasses.

“What happened? Professor Dumbledore says that we’re not supposed to ask you about it, but I’ve been dying to know,” she said in one breath.

“Why not?” he asked.

She shrugged, “he didn’t elaborate.”

“Well, I’ve got no problem telling you,” he said, before launching into the story.

He probably wasn’t as detailed as he had been in comparison to the last time that he’d told the story, but that didn’t matter. She was his best friend and he wasn’t interested in keeping secrets from her. While he talked, Hermione had grasped his hand once more with one hand while with the other, she gently (or not so gently in the more intense parts) stroked his arm. Finally, Harry found that he’d talked himself out.

“So what’s been happening while I’ve been asleep?” he asked.

“Well, as soon as you and Lisa disappeared, Neville and I were revived and, along with the rest of the school, were sent back to our common room,” Hermione replied. “They only let us out this morning. That’s when Professor Dumbledore made a speech at breakfast saying that the danger to the school had passed, that you and Lisa had had something to do with it and that you were in the hospital wing because of it and that we weren’t to ask you about it.”
Harry’s eyes narrowed as he processed what the school was probably thinking. “So there was no mention of the basilisk?” At her head shake, his eyes narrowed further. “Or that it was now dead? Only that I was somehow involved, that there were aurors dealing with it all and that I’m now here?”

He groaned. “Then the whole school’ll still believe that it was me! They’ll still blame me for everything.”

At Hermione’s reluctant nod, Harry sat up further in bed and began swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He was pleased to see that his knee was no longer bandaged, although his right shoulder and arm was still heavy swathed in bandages and bound tightly to his body.

“Harry?” Hermione asked worriedly.

“Where’s my clothes, Hermione?” he asked.

“Harry, I don’t think that Madam Pomfrey would like you getting out of bed,” she admonished.

“I’ll come back later,” he told her. “But I’ve got to try and set things straight now.”

Reluctantly, Hermione opened the small cupboard beside his bed and lifted out the folded clothes that she found in there. Then, while she waited outside, he awkwardly pulled off the hospital gown and pulled on his trousers. With his arm bound the way it was, a shirt was impossible.

“Um, Hermione?” he asked.

When she poked her head around the privacy curtains, her cheeks instantly turned a brilliant shade of red at his state of half-dress.

“Can you help me with my wand holster and cloak?” he asked.

Once he was adequately dressed with the cloak tightly closed to cover his bare chest, Harry grabbed up the staff and began to slowly make his way past the bed.

“Harry? What do you think you’re doing?” Sirius asked as he strode through the doors to the Hospital wing. “Get back in bed, Pup.”

Roughly, Harry shook his head. “I’ve got to fix things, Sirius and I can’t do that from here.”

Sirius frowned at him as he attempted to guide his godson back towards his bed. “What’re you talking about Harry?”

“Dumbledore hasn’t told anyone what’s happened. They’re all still going to think that it was my fault. I’ve got to fix things,” Harry replied roughly.

“You’ve heard how everyone’s treated him, Sirius,” Hermione said quietly.

Sirius gave him a long, hard look before finally giving a single stiff nod. “Alright then, come on, it’s nearly dinner.”

Miraculously, the three managed to escape the confines of the Hospital Wing with Madam Pomfrey being none the wiser.

As they slowly descended the last staircase towards the Entryway, they were met with a very strange sight. Professor McGonagall, along with Professors Flitwick and Sprout, were all slowly manoeuvring a group of intense sounding witches and wizards towards the main doors.
Suddenly, one of the witches, one with curly blonde hair, bejewelled spectacles and wearing magenta coloured robes, managed to break away from the pack to race towards Harry.

“Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter, Mister Potter, I was wondering what you have to say about the reported rumours that The Chamber of Secrets has been found and opened?”

Harry looked at the witch, her lime green quill quivering in anticipation, before lifting his eyes to the rest of the witches and wizards who he now realised were journalists.

“Actually, I was just about to tell my classmates what happened. You’re all welcome to stick around and listen if you want,” he said.

Instantly, the journalists broke away from the three professors and made a beeline for the Great Hall.

“Mister Potter, are you sure that this is wise?” Professor Flitwick asked.

“Does Madam Pomfrey know that you’re out of bed?” Professor McGonagall asked, her eyes narrowed as though she already suspected the answer.

“I don’t know if it’s wise, Professor,” Harry replied, intentionally ignoring his Head of Houses’ question, “but it’s something that I need to do. They’ve got to understand what’s been going on and that it wasn’t me petrifying people.”

Professor McGonagall’s eyes flicked to Sirius standing behind him before she gave a soft sigh and stepped aside.

“Dumbledore’s not going to like this,” she murmured.

“He’ll get over it.” Sirius retorted.

Harry, with Sirius and Hermione flanking him, walked into the Great Hall. The journalists that had been in the Entry Hall were arrayed in a semi-circle in front of the door. Behind them, hurrying up between the full and very quiet Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables, strode Headmaster Dumbledore. Madam Bones and Professor Snape were mere steps behind him.

“What is the meaning of this?” Dumbledore asked. “I was certain that I asked you all to leave.”

“You did,” one wizard with a camera around his neck replied, “but he asked us to stay.”

Harry watched as Dumbledore started when he realised that the journalist had pointed to him.

“Harry, my boy,” Dumbledore said as he reached Harry and attempted to steer him back out of the Great Hall. “May I ask what it is that you are doing out of the Hospital Wing? Madam Pomfrey will be most upset that you’re out of bed, you know.”

“I need to talk to the school,” Harry replied. “I need to tell them what happened. That it wasn’t my fault.”

Dumbledore smiled sadly down at him, his grandfather persona radiating from the old man, “I’ve already explained to your classmates all that they need to know.”

Harry stated up at him. “No you didn’t! I’ve been told what you’ve said, and it wasn’t that I wasn’t to blame for all of the petrifications.”

Then, without giving the Headmaster a chance to reply, Harry ripped his arm out of his grasp and began to once more enter the Great Hall.
“Harry, I’m afraid that I must forbid you from entering the Great Hall at this time and insist that you return to the Hospital Wing,” Dumbledore stated.

“He needs to do this and he is going to do this,” Sirius retorted, having hurried after his godson. “Come on, Harry.”

With Sirius’ hand under his elbow, the two of them quick-stepped through the crowd. Around them, murmurings broke out up and down the four House Tables. Before Dumbledore could reach them Sirius had guided him to stand just in front of the podium that the teacher’s used for announcements.

Looking out at the hundreds of upturned faces, Harry had a mild panic attack. These were the ones who’d been insulting him and cursing him for months. These were the ones who believed that he was Slytherin’s Heir, the one responsible for attacking their friends and classmates. And he could see it on their faces. They still believed it.

One by one, he picked out his friends, those precious few who had never wavered in their belief that he was innocent: Hermione, standing just off to one side, an anxious look on her face; Neville, hunched over his plate; Daphne, Tracey and Fiona huddled at the very end of the Slytherin House Table. And he thought of those missing, the ones still lying petrified in the Hospital Wing: Colin and Lil. Together, they gave him the strength that he needed.

“Um, hi everyone,” he began nervously. “I know that you haven’t really been told what’s been going on. I know that all you’ve heard is that there’s no more danger. But I can see that you all still think I’m the one responsible and I wanted this chance to explain what’s been happening.

“Yesterday, I was taken down into the Chamber of Secrets.” Muttering immediately broke out, but Harry ploughed on over the top of it all. “I was taken by someone who was being possessed by Lord Voldemort.” Small screams of terror erupted along with questions, accusations and talk all around the hall.

“But he’s gone! I killed the thing that was possessing people,” he shouted them down.

“What about the thing that was petrifying people? Was that You-Know-Who, too?” someone yelled sarcastically.

“No, that was a basilisk,” Harry replied. “But I killed that too.”

“You expect us to believe that you killed a basilisk?” an incredulous voice yelled.

“Yeah, what do you take us for, idiots or something?” another joined in.

“No, no, I did it with this,” Harry replied before holding up the rowan staff.

A quick spell later and streams of multi-coloured stars was shooting out of the end of it, silencing the crowd.

Looking around, he could see that what he was trying simply wasn’t going to work. No matter what he said, most would never believe him. At best, they might ignore him; at worst, he’d be labelled a lying, attention-seeking prat. Quickly, he changed his tactics.

“Look, I don’t expect you to believe me just because I say so,” Harry called. “So instead, how about I show some of you. How about all the prefects and the Head Boy and Girl, some of the teachers, you journalists and Madam Bones come with me down to the Chamber and I’ll show you what happened? My friends get to come too.”
Immediately, the hall broke into a combination of excited mutterings and indignant exclamations of those that didn’t fall into one of those categories.

“That sounds like an excellent idea, Mister Potter,” Madam Bones stated as she joined him on the small platform.

Before Harry knew it, he was leading two dozen students, half a dozen journalists, Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick and Snape, plus Madam Bones, Sirius and his five friends along the fifth floor corridor.

As he waited for everyone to arrange themselves for the journey under the school, Harry looked up at the small etching of the snake on the torch bracket. Suddenly, multiple images of identical etchings that he’d seen all over the school leapt into his mind and he wondered.

For now those, he had a job to do.

“§Open§!” he commanded.

Exactly as it did the last time, the wall before him shivered and wiggled until the stones had rearranged themselves into a facsimile of the entrance to Diagon Alley.

One by one, the group followed Harry inside, dozens of wandtips lighting up the dark, dank tunnel. Slowly, steadily, Harry led them down into the depths of the ground, far underneath the ancient castle. When they were all assembled in front of the door to the Chamber itself, Harry commanded the great metal door to open before walking inside.

Great gasps erupted around him along with flashes of light and great plumes of purple smoke as those journalists with cameras took photo after photo. Hermione’s hand slipped around his arm, his hand full with the staff, as they slowly walked between the pillars.

“You must have been so terrified,” she whispered.

Turning his head, he allowed the corners of his mouth to lift in an ironic smile. “That’s one way to put it.”

“Merlin’s beard,” someone murmured, their voice echoing around the Chamber.

Harry looked back ahead to see what had transfixed the group. One by one, they spread out, all eyes focused on only one point – the statue of Salazar Slytherin. Time seemed to stand still as Professor Snape took slow careful steps forward until he was standing close enough to reach out and touch the stone almost reverentially.

A sudden flash of light from a camera seemed to break the spell and a firework of lights lit up the area as photo after photo was taken. By the time that the journalists had had their fill, a light purple haze hovered just above everyone’s head.

“I’d guess what you really want to see is over this way,” Harry said, gesturing to their left.

The group slowly began manoeuvring their way in the indicated direction until Harry suddenly found himself alone except for Hermione who was still holding on to his arm and Daphne who’s attached herself to his other side. Stumbling to a halt, he looked back only to find a collection of horror-filled faces. Quite a number were in fact now slowly backing away.

After glancing forward once more, Harry called over his shoulder. “It’s alright. It’s quite dead.”
“You fought that thing, Potter?” one of the Slytherin prefects asked.

“And killed it?” another asked, their voice warbling.

“Yeah,” he nodded.

“I don’t believe that there has been a basilisk this large ever seen before,” Professor Dumbledore stated.

Harry looked interestedly at his ‘kill’. Now that he could look at it without the fear of being killed hanging over his head, he could see that it was even larger than what he’d first thought. Its sickly green skin was easily sixty feet long and even the top of Professor Dumbledore’s hat wasn’t high enough to be able to see over the top of the closest coil.

A black shape suddenly appeared in his peripheral vision and Harry turned to see Professor Snape standing looking very uncomfortable before him.

“Potter. I am sure that you are aware that there are many parts of a basilisk that are incredibly rare but also incredibly useful in potion making,” he said, looking as though he was struggling to suppress some bile. “I would like your permission to harvest some of those ingredients.”

“Severus, it’s not just potion materials that could be harvested,” Professor McGonagall piped up. “The hide, the meat, even the skeleton would all be well sought after materials.”

Madam Bones continued the discussion. “And as the slayer of this beast, Mister Potter is sure to make a tiny profit from having the basilisk harvested.”

Harry looked confusedly between the two. “Harvested?”

“I would be willing to offer my services, Potter,” Professor Snape drawled.

With a slight nod to let her know that he’d heard, Harry faced the adults. “Thank you for your offer, Professor, but I think that I’ll get some goblins in here to harvest it for me. However, since you asked so nicely, I’ll make sure that you get a share for the school’s potion stores.”

Professor Snape’s nod was interrupted by a call from Professor Dumbledore. “Harry, where was this marvellous room in which you found that staff? There’s sure to be some interesting relics from the past in there that should be examined.”

“Actually, Headmaster, I think that we’d better leave that for another time,” Sirius replied. “Harry’s starting to look a little unsteady on his feet and if we don’t get out of here soon, we’re going to be trapped down here.”

“Could we get a couple of photograph of Mister Potter and the basilisk before we leave?” one of the journalists asked, already starting to manoeuvre Harry closer to the head of the basilisk.

With a small sigh, Sirius allowed Harry to be put in place and photos to be taken for the next five minutes before he ushered everyone towards the door.
“Don’t even think about it, Mister Potter!” Madam Pomfrey warned. “You are not leaving that bed for at least another two days. Yesterdays’ shenanigans were more than enough.”

Harry’s attempt at a protest was quickly cut off.

“If I even think that you’re going to get off that bed, I’ll perform a permanent sticking charm between you and the bed,” she threatened.

After a last long look to make sure that he wasn’t going anywhere, the healer strode back to her office, muttering something inaudible under her breath.

“A fierce warrior, that one. Definitely not one to be crossed.”

Harry looked across at Slipshard before giving an exasperated sigh. “You’ve got no idea.”

“So, Mister Potter, to business,” Slipshard said, pulling out a wad of parchment from his briefcase. “Would I be correct in thinking that you have something in mind to do with your own warrior exploits?”

Harry nodded, “yes, the basilisk.”

At a gesture from the goblin, Harry paused. Then, with elaborate hand movements, Slipshard erected a series of privacy wards around the bed.

“What did you have in mind, Mister Potter?” Slipshard asked.

“I’ve been told that I can have the basilisk harvested. That people will pay quite a bit of money for it,” Harry stated.

“Indeed,” Slipshard replied. “Basilisk skin is even more prized than that of a dragon for use in armour; its internal organs, eyes and venom can be used in potions; the meat is considered quite a delicacy by some; and even the skeleton and fangs will be highly sought after. I take it you’d like a goblin team to harvest it for you?”

“Yes, if you can arrange it,” Harry replied.

“For the right price, anything can be arranged,” Slipshard replied with a predatory grin.

“How’s five percent of the proceeds from the sale of the skin, meat and skeleton sound?” Harry asked.

“A good start,” Slipshard replied. “Ten percent would be much better.”

“I’m sure that it would,” Harry replied, having been warned that he’d need to bargain for the goblin’s services. “But considering the size of the thing – sixty feet or so – everyone’s going to make a huge amount of money from it. Seven percent.”

“Sixty feet, you say? I had heard that it was large. Eight percent,” Slipshard countered.

“Of course, if you wanted to display the skeleton in Gringotts for a month or so before you sell it I wouldn’t object. Seven and a half percent,” Harry replied, desperately trying to keep a grin off of his face.
“You drive a hard bargain, Mister Potter,” Slipshard stated, his eyes gleaming. “Deal. May we both find our vaults overflowing from such a venture.”

After clasping hands to seal the deal, Slipshard began drawing up the contract.

“There’s a few things that I’d like to do with parts of the basilisk,” Harry stated. At Slipshard’s gesture, he continued. “Can you open a new vault for whatever money I get from it, please? Also, those parts that are useful for potions, I’d like them split into three. One part to sell, one part to be given to Professor Snape for use at Hogwarts and the last part sealed in preservation jars and placed in the same vault for me. I’d also like a half a dozen of the fangs placed in my vault as souvenirs. You said that the skin can be made into armour? I’d like enough of it to make half a dozen suits placed in my vault as well. Lastly, I’d like to set up a trust fund for those that the basilisk affected.”

“All of that can be done quite easily, Mister Potter,” Slipshard replied, his quill scratching away. “What did you have in mind for the trust funds?”

“I’m not sure how much I’ll get from the sale of the basilisk, so I’ll need you to tell me if what I have in mind will actually work,” Harry began. “There were seven people petrified by the basilisk. I was thinking of setting a trust vault for each of them that they can access when they are of age to the value of ten thousand galleons each. The two people who had Lord Voldemort possessing them with that diary also get ten thousand galleons. And I’ll add an extra five hundred galleons for Mister Filch as his familiar was also petrified.”

Slipshard stared at him. “That is incredibly generous, Mister Potter. And what you have proposed will only be a fraction of the proceeds you will receive.”

Harry let out a sigh of relief even as his eyes suddenly grew huge as he realised the amount of gold he was about to come into.

“What are the names of recipients of the trust funds?” Slipshard asked.

“Argus Filch, Lil Moon, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, Luna Lovegood, Colin Creevey and Damien O’Hara were all petrified,” Harry replied. “Argus Filch’s familiar was also petrified. And Luna Lovegood and Lisa Turpin were possessed by the diary. Oh, and I’d like a new top of the line wizards’ camera bought for both Colin and Damien to replace the ones that the basilisk’s gaze destroyed.”

Slipshard nodded. “It shall all be as you have requested. If you’ll give me a few moments more, I’ll have the contract drawn up before I leave. I suspect that it’ll take a couple of days to gather the goblin team to harvest the beast.”

“That’s alright,” Harry replied. “You’ll need me to take you down there since you need a parselmouth to open the passageways. And you heard Madam Pomfrey before. I won’t be going anywhere for a while yet.”

-oOoOo-

“Come in, Mister Potter.”

Hearing the call, Harry tentatively opened the door to the Headmaster’s study and did as he’d been bade. The office looked much like it did the last time that Harry was there just prior to Christmas, without all of the extra bodies. Today it was just he and the Headmaster.

“Sit down, my boy,” Professor Dumbledore indicated one of the chairs in front of his desk before holding out a small crystal bowl towards him. “Lemon drop?”
“No thank you, Sir,” Harry managed.

Harry watched as Professor Dumbledore sat back in his chair, his hands steepled in front of him and his clear blue eyes twinkling away over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

“Before we begin, Mister Potter, I am afraid that I must convey my disappointment in your recent actions.”

Harry tried hard not to react to the sad, disapproving tone of voice.

“What do you mean, Sir?” he asked.

“You expressly disobeyed my wishes that you return to the Hospital Wing last week when you were clearly still in poor health from your little adventure,” Dumbledore began. “Then, also against my wishes, you addressed not only the school but also a group of journalists, giving them information that it would have been wiser to keep protected.”

“I’m sorry that you feel that way, Sir, but I knew that if I didn’t say something, that everyone would still think that I was responsible for getting Lil, Colin and the others petrified,” Harry replied.

Dumbledore gave a slow shake of his head. “While I understand your reasoning, Harry, you must also understand that wizards much older and wiser than you often see things more clearly and know what is best for you.”

Harry gave a small nod of understanding.

“It is my understanding that you led a team of goblins down to the Chamber yesterday as well?” Dumbledore asked. At Harry’s nod, he continued. “I would have very much liked to have been a part of such an undertaking. As I’m sure that you are aware, the opportunity to learn about one of the Founders from what they have left behind is an incredibly rare opportunity. I’m sure you can understand my eagerness to study such relics?”

“Yes, of course, Sir,” Harry replied. “But we were only down there for the basilisk. No one had a chance to look for anything else.”

“Perhaps the two of us could take an excursion down to the Chamber over the holidays, then?” Dumbledore suggested, his eyes twinkling away.

Harry shrugged, not sure how to answer that.

“And until then, I was wondering if you might consent to letting me borrow that amazing staff that you found. Wizard staffs are so rare these days and the chance to learn from such a magical relic is not to be passed up,” Dumbledore asked.

“I’ll have to think about it, Sir,” Harry replied, beginning to wonder how he could escape the office.

The Headmaster nodded his head slowly. “Of course, Harry, of course. In the meantime, as the summer holidays are almost upon us, I thought that it was high time that I elaborated upon a few facts that I’m sure you are unaware of.”

“Is this about what happened to Mister Malfoy for giving Luna that Diary?” Harry asked, his interest piqued.

“No, no, it wasn’t,” Dumbledore replied. “But since you ask, I’m afraid that he was let off with a fine. A rather hefty fine, but a fine nonetheless.”
“How’s that possible?” Harry spluttered. “He used that diary to set a basilisk loose on the castle.”

“Ah, but you see, he claimed not to realise that the diary once belonged to Lord Voldemort or that he could control someone through it or of the misdeeds that would result from such an unfortunate happenstance.”

Harry shook his head at the absurdity of the situation. He made a mental note to ask Madam Bones about it the next time that he saw her.

“Now, as I was saying, there is something that I needed to speak to you about. I have spoken to both your Aunt and Uncle in regards to the unfortunate events of last summer,” Dumbledore told him, “and, while they were a trifle upset …”

Harry snorted at that. That was like saying that a nesting mother dragon was as placid as a goldfish.

“… they understand that these things happen with teenage boys,” Dumbledore continued. “As such, all has been forgiven and you are free to return to your relative’s home the day after tomorrow.”

Harry’s voice failed him. His mind flashed back to that day at the end of August when he’d had to go to the Ministry for doing underage magic. Dumbledore was there when he’d explained the magical oath. Nothing was ever going to make him go back to Privet Drive again. Besides, he’d already arranged to spend his holidays with Sirius and Remus.

Obviously misunderstanding Harry’s silence, Dumbledore continued with a smile. “I have also arranged a small treat for you. After your birthday at the end of July, I shall come and collect you and you can spend the remainder of your holiday with your friend Ron at his house.”

“Ron?” Harry spluttered. “Ron Weasley? We’re not friends! He thought I was a nutter and the one petrifying people! He kept calling me the ‘Heir of Slytherin’!”

“Come, come, my boy, friends often have misunderstandings. I’m certain that this is one such case,” Dumbledore waved his protests away.

Harry clamped down on his retort, figuring that yelling at the Headmaster was never a good thing to do.

“Is that all, Sir?” he managed through clenched teeth.

“Yes, of course, my boy,” Dumbledore replied. “Have a good summer.”

Harry was up out of the chair and across the room as fast as his feet would take him without running. Once the door behind him had closed though, he bolted for the Transfiguration classroom.

Having sought and gained Madam Pomfrey’s permission, Harry made sure to make his way to the hospital wing straight after relaying to Professor McGonagall everything that Dumbledore had just told him.

Sidling in through the double doors, Harry slid along the wall until he could see the beds that he was most interested in. There were eight of them altogether, one for each of the basilisk’s victims, including Mrs Norris.

Madam Pomfrey gave him a nod as she passed him by, a tray full of vials in her hand. Scattered around the room were a handful of witches and wizards, the families of those affected. Well, Harry
noted, not all of them. There was no one there for Mister Filch or for Colin. But then, he knew that Colin’s parents were muggles, a housewife and a milkman if he remembered correctly.

That made Harry’s decision easy. Picking up the box that he’d brought by earlier, he made his way across to stand by Colin’s bed.

He watched as Madam Pomfrey moved from bed to bed, pouring the vial of potion into each person’s mouth before using magic to move it down their throat. Within minutes of the potion being injected, Colin started to regain his colour. His skin changed from an off-white to a healthy pinkish tinge. A minute or so after that, Harry saw his fingers start to flex. The next movement that he noticed was a flick of his eye-lids.

“Hey, Colin,” Harry said gently.

“H…Har…Harry,” Colin managed through a voice that sounded incredibly disused.

Harry smiled down into the younger boy’s blinking brown eyes.

“Where am I?” Colin asked.

“You’re in the hospital. You were petrified,” Harry told him.

Suddenly, Colin’s eyes widened. “Harry! There was this snake! It was huge!”

Harry laid a hand on the excitable boy’s shoulder. “Take it easy, Colin. We know all about it. It was a basilisk.”

“Is it …is it still around?” Colin asked in a shaky voice.

“You don’t need to worry. It’s dead,” Harry replied.

“Who killed it?” the boy asked.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Actually, I did.”

“Cool, Harry!” Colin beamed before starting to look around. “I thought I had my camera with me.”

“You did, but when you looked at the basilisk through your camera, it got fried,” Harry replied. Then, after reaching into the box that he’d laid on the nearby table, Harry pulled out something that made Colin’s eyes bug out. “This is for you, to make up for it.”

“Is that …?” Colin’s voice trailed off.

“Yep, the latest in wizarding cameras. The *EyeWiz42*,” Harry replied. “It’s got all the attachments – wide angle lenses, zoom function, colour and black and white plates, a built in tripod and a bunch of others that I haven’t figured out yet.”

Movement on the next bed over caught Harry’s attention and he moved across to the older boy looking hungrily at Colin’s new toy.

“Here you go, Damien. There’s one here for you, too,” Harry said, handing over a second camera.

“Thanks, Harry,” Damien grinned.

Noticing that everyone in the hospital wing was now looking at him, Harry decided that now was as good a time as any to make the announcement.
“Um, I’m sure that you’ll all hear the story later, but the quick version is that you were all petrified by a basilisk,” he began, pausing slightly for the gasps that sprang up. “As it turns out, I ended up killing it and because of what it did to you all, a trust fund has been set up for each of you for ten thousand galleons for when you are of age. Mister Filch, there’s an extra five hundred galleons in your fund for Mrs Norris.”

For a moment, he was sure that Mister Filch was going to cry so overwhelmed was he. In the end, the crotchety old man simply mouthed a ‘thank you’ at Harry, before collapsing back onto his bed, Mrs Norris clutched tightly in his hands.

Seeing that Colin was happily occupied with his new camera, Harry made his way across the ward and up between two particular beds.

“Harry!” Lil’ Moon exclaimed as she reached out and pulled him into a bone-crushing hug. Noticing him wince, she quickly let go and held him at arm’s length. “Are you alright?”

“I got a little hurt,” Harry shrugged. “Madam Pomfrey says that my shoulder’s going to be a bit stiff and sore for a few weeks at least.”

With a nod and a squeeze of her hand, Harry excused himself and turned to the opposite bed.

“Mister Potter. Xenophillius Lovegood. It’s an honour to meet you,” a tall, thin man said, reaching out to shake his hand.

Harry looked into the large unfocussed eyes and flyaway grey hair and immediately knew that this man was Luna’s father. They both seemed to ooze an air of not actually being on the same plane of existence as everyone else.

“Hello, Harry Potter.”

“Hi, Luna,” Harry smiled and then, “it’s nice to meet you, Sir.”

“It was very brave of you to face a basilisk, Harry,” Luna stated.

Harry shrugged. “I guess. But it wasn’t like I was given much choice.”

“No, I don’t suppose Tom would have wanted you to live, would he?” Luna mused.

“You really managed to get under Riddle’s skin, Luna,” Harry told her. “He was extremely confused about everything that you told him and incredibly annoyed that you tried to kill him.”

“He didn’t exactly seem a happy sort of person. But then, living inside a book is bound to make anyone unhappy, I suppose,” Luna replied.

Harry shook his head. “Do you know who Tom is, Luna?”

“Oh, yes, of course. You-Know-Who. I hope that you were able to destroy the diary, Harry, I think that it’s of the utmost importance that you do,” she told him.

“Don’t worry, Luna, I’ve taken care of it,” Harry reassured her. “Uh, I hope you don’t mind me asking, but what are nargles and wrackspurts? It’s just that Riddle mentioned them and he seemed a bit distracted by it.”

Luna’s large grey eyes stared into his green ones, her head cocked to the side slightly. “They’re both incredibly shy creatures. Not many people believe in them, I’m sad to say. Daddy and I have been
trying to get a photo of them for years. People write to us in our magazine, *The Quibbler*, telling us where they’ve seen them.”

“You own *The Quibbler*?” Harry asked Mister Lovegood.

Mister Lovegood smiled absently at him. “We do. We’ll have to send you a subscription for what you’ve done for Luna.”

“Thank you, Sir, that’s very kind,” Harry replied before turning back to Luna. “Actually, Luna, that trust vault that I mentioned, it’s going to have a bit more than ten thousand galleons in yours.”

“Why would that be, Harry Potter?” Luna asked.

“Well, I decided that, as both you and Lisa Turpin, who had the diary after you, were possessed by Riddle, I’ve made sure that you get an extra ten thousand galleons for what he put you through,” Harry explained.

“You didn’t have to do that, Harry,” Luna said.

“I know, but I wanted to. I can’t imagine that it was very nice having him in your head like that and I wanted to do something nice for you both to make up for it,” he explained.

Luna’s eyes misted over at his words. “That’s incredibly kind of you, Harry. It’s almost like having a friend.”

Harry stared at the small girl in front of him, as he remembered a strange comment that she’d made months ago about something he’d said being the nicest thing that had ever been said to her before. After all of the years of having Dudley chase away potential friends, he knew what it was like to be friendless and there was no way that he was ever going to turn down a potential friend.

“I’d be happy to be your friend, Luna,” he smiled.

Suddenly, his arms were filled with a small blonde girl as she cried tears of joy into his shoulder. A large hand landed on his other shoulder and Harry looked up into the face of Mister Lovegood, a large smile beaming down at him from the man’s face.
Chapter 37

Albus Dumbledore stood tall, staring out of the window of his office. His hands were clasped lightly behind him as he watched the small puff of white smoke in the distance over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest. The Hogwart’s Express had begun its long journey back towards London and another year of learning was over.

In his mind’s eyes, Dumbledore saw the hundreds of students sitting in the carriages, laughing and talking, their lives merry, for today, their holidays had begun. As he thought of them all, his mind settled on one in particular.

Harry Potter.

The boy had been most vexing this past year. He’d arrived back at the castle far too independent and continued along in the same vein. He’d abandoned one of his teachers and hired his own tutors. A sigh of frustration escaped Dumbledore at that point. After having The-Boy-Who-Lived lead nearly the entirety of his year-mates in a revolt against the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, the blonde ponce had up and quit. Apparently, the damage that was being done to Lockhart’s reputation was far too great for him to stay on. That meant that Dumbledore was going to be forced, once again, to search for a new teacher.

And then there had been all that trouble with the Chamber of Secrets. At first, it appeared as though fortune had fallen into Dumbledore’s lap. The school had turned upon young Harry and Dumbledore was sure that he was being moulded once more into a compliant, fearful boy who would be much easier to guide towards his destiny.

But, of course, the boy had had to go and ruin all of that with that damned speech and then leading so many down into the Chamber itself. And once again, Harry was being hailed as a hero. A year’s worth of being down-trodden down the drain.

Unfortunately though, there were a few who had never abandoned the boy. And the worst one was that Granger girl. Nothing had shaken the girls’ belief in the boy. Thankfully, he had two months to work on Harry and to break that connection. Molly Weasley was going to be incredibly useful there. Her mothering instincts should have already kicked in from the signing of that betrothal contract and if Dumbledore knew her as well as he thought he did, then Harry and Ginny were soon going to be spending a great deal of time in one another’s company.

Of course, Harry wasn’t the only one who had been causing headaches this year. A number of the staff, led by his Deputy had grown far too vocal with their own opinions. Minerva had even had the audacity to argue with him and to go behind his back and talk to the aurors! She was another one that needed to be reined in and reminded that Dumbledore was the one who knew what needed to be done for the Greater Good.

As the last curl of smoke disappeared behind the mountains, Dumbledore’s thoughts turned once more to young Harry. He knew that it was imperative that the boy return to the home of his Aunt and Uncle. There, his independent streak would finally be snuffed out. Plus it’d also give Harry the impression that Dumbledore was the one that he should look up to and listen to once he’d ‘freed’ the boy from the place.

But there was likely to be a large problem simply getting the boy back to Surrey. Actually, two. Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. Dumbledore turned the two men over in his mind, seeking a way to distract them and allow Dumbledore to do what needed to be done.
Unfortunately, young Sirius could be rather headstrong.

*No, not young Sirius,* Dumbledore reminded himself, *Lord Black could be rather headstrong.*

Lord Black and his best friend, the *werewolf,* Remus Lupin.

And that was enough to give the Chief Warlock an idea. Of course, he’d need an unwitting ally. His old friend Elphias Doge was a Special Advisor to the Wizengamot and could easily be persuaded to have the Wizengamot seek to revisit the laws concerning werewolves. Of course, he’d need the backing of a highly respected old, pureblood family.

With a smile on his lips, Dumbledore turned away from the window. He had a floo call to make.

-oOoOo-

One particular cabin on the Hogwart’s Express was filled to overflowing. Ideally, each cabin on the train could hold eight students, assuming of course, that they didn’t mind a bit of squeezing. But this cabin had a fair few more.

Harry had ended up against the window with Hermione somehow on his lap. Beside him, Neville, Lil and Luna filled up the bench seat. Across from them sat Daphne, Tracey, Fiona, Susan and Hannah all squashed together. And hanging out of the door were the Weasley twins and Colin Creevey.

Of course, at that particular moment, everyone bar one was blinking owlishly at the spots in their eyes.

“Colin, what’ve I told you about that?” Harry said exasperatedly.

“That I should ask before taking anyone’s photo,” Colin replied with a smile on his face, “but I couldn’t help it, it was just too good of a photo to waste.”

“He’s got you, there, mate,” Fred stated.

“Yeah, Hermione feeding you a pumpkin pasty’s too cute to pass up the chance to take a photo,” George agreed.

“Of course, Colin,” Fred said, a massive grin on his face. “We’ll be wanting a copy of that.”

“We’ll even pay you,” George added.

“And we’ll reap dividends from the blackmail we’ll make from those two,” Fred finished before ducking the chocolate frog that Harry had just thrown at him.

“Cheers, Harry, I was still a bit peckish,” George grinned.

A sudden commotion from the corridor paused the laughter emanating from the group. Draco Malfoy, flanked once more by his two bookends, Crabbe and Goyle, had just appeared. Harry’s eyes narrowed as he waited for the snide remarks and insults to begin. Unexpectedly though, the blonde Slytherin took a single look at the crowded cabin before beating a hasty retreat.

“Well, that’s *his* usual visit taken care of,” Neville remarked.

“We’ve hardly heard a thing out of Malfoy all year in the Slytherin Common Room,” Daphne remarked.
“Yeah, without his bodyguards backing him up, no one was bothering to pay any attention to him at all,” Tracey added.

“I don’t see why Madam Pomfrey couldn’t leave them petrified,” Fiona pouted. “Slytherin’s IQ took a steep dive once they re-joined the House.”

“I doubt that we’ll have Crabbe and Goyle with us next year in third year,” Lil told the crowd.

“Why’s that?” Hermione asked.

“Professor McGonagall came and talked to all of us who were petrified before we left the hospital wing,” Lil replied. “Because we missed so many lessons, we need to prove that we know enough to advance to the next year. We’re all having special exams straight after the holidays to see if we know enough.”

“If you like, I can send you my class notes for the year,” Susan offered.

“We all can,” Hannah agreed. “That way you’ll know what to study.”

“I’ve still got all my notes from first year that you can have if you like, Luna,” Harry offered seeing the crestfallen face of the small blonde girl.

Immediately Luna’s face lit up and he knew that if it wasn’t for the crowded carriage and Hermione sitting in his lap, his arms would have been full of the small Ravenclaw once again.

“Thank you, Harry,” she beamed instead.

“I still don’t know why you’re giving Crabbe and Goyle some of the money from the basilisk,” Daphne stated.

Harry sighed and adjusted his hold on Hermione to be better able to see the girl directly across from him. “It was the right thing to do. I’m giving some to Luna, Colin and Lil, so I had to give some to those two idiots as well.”

“But they had a wand to Lil’s head when they were petrified!” Hannah protested.

“Professor McGonagall dealt with that,” Lil cut in. “They won’t be allowed to join the Quidditch team next year even if they wanted to, plus she’d making them write a two foot essay on why bullying is wrong to be handed in the first day back next year.”

“Is two months going to be enough time for them to write that much?” Fred quipped.

“Depends how big they write, brother of mine,” George replied.

Soon the conversation changed to what everyone was doing for the holidays.

While he listened, Harry couldn’t keep his mind from the girl in his lap. He knew that they were each other’s best friend. In fact, they were each other’s first friend. And over the last two years, they’d spent nearly every day together, learning about each other, laughing together and having fun and enjoying each other’s company.

Not to mention that he’d taught her to fly. This past year, Hermione had finally managed to get past her fear of heights to enjoy being up on a broom sweeping around the pitch or over the Forbidden Forest or the Black Lake. They’d spend countless hours simply flying together. But when Harry thought about those times that he enjoyed the most, his mind inevitably settled on their first flying
lessons – the ones where she had her arms wrapped around him as they flew together.

It’d taken quite a bit for Harry to learn to stop flinching whenever someone got too close to him or tried to touch him. And it was thanks to Hermione that he now enjoyed the occasional hug.

“My parents have a dental conference in America this year,” Hermione was saying, “so we’ll be off to the US for about four weeks. I’m hoping that I can convince them to let me go to Salem while I’m there. It’s supposed to be the largest magical community in North America.”

Four weeks. Harry’s mind fixated on that one fact. Four weeks was a long time. And at that distance, it wouldn’t be either easy or practical to send mail to each other. He tried to imagine spending four weeks without seeing or talking to Hermione in all that time. Just the thought of it left him feeling a little nauseous.

Harry looked at the animated expression on his best friend’s face. Her eyes were lit up with excitement and he could feel her body bursting with anticipation at the thought of experiencing one of the magical cultures that Mick had told them about. Harry swallowed hard as he realised just how … pretty … Hermione truly was.

The wildest, strangest idea suddenly popped into his mind and he couldn’t help wondering.

The big question, of course, was did he have the courage to go through with it?

-oOoOo-

A great gush of steam preceded a whistle as the Hogwart’s Express finally pulled into Platform Nine and Three Quarters at King’s Cross Station. That signal marked dozens of doors up and down the train slamming open and students piling out.

Calls were shouted in greeting from both the students and their waiting parents. Hugs were given to friends that weren’t going to be seen for a couple of months and hugs were given to family that hadn’t been seen for many more months.

With a last pat of his pocket to ensure that his shrunken trunk was still where he’d placed it not ten minutes before, Harry followed his friends out onto the platform.

Immediately, Susan and Hannah gave a final wave before disappearing into the crowd. The tall form of Xenophilius Lovegood marked Luna’s disappearance. Daphne, Tracey and Fiona melted into the crowd, their hands firmly grasped so that they weren’t in danger of losing each other as they went in search of some trolleys.

“Gran!” Neville exclaimed, rushing over to give the severe looking Madam Longbottom a hug.

“Mister Potter, Miss Granger,” Madam Longbottom greeted with a nod of her head. “It’s good to see you again.”

“It’s nice to see you, too, Madam Longbottom,” Harry and Hermione said together.

“I’m afraid that we must depart, Neville,” the old lady said to her grandson, “however we’ll make sure that you have your friends over to visit during the holiday. Assuming, of course, that they’re interested in such an idea.”

“We’d be delighted,” Hermione beamed.

“Yeah, I’d really like that,” Harry agreed.
“Then it’s settled,” Madam Longbottom said with a tiny smile. “Expect an owl in a week or so. Come along, Neville.”

“Bye guys,” Neville called.

“See ya, Nev,” Harry waved.

“Oh, Harry, it’s so good to see you again!”

Harry squirmed in the fierce embrace of he didn’t know who. Finally managing to extract himself, he took a couple of quick steps backwards.

“Um, hi Mrs Weasley,” he said.

Glancing at Hermione’s face, he could tell that she was just as confused as he was at the way the dumpy woman had just rushed up and started hugging Harry.

“Professor Dumbledore tells me that you’re going to be spending some of your holidays at the Burrow,” Mrs Weasley stated. “You and Ron and Ginny are going to have such a good time together.”

“Sure, Mrs Weasley,” Harry managed, deliberately failing to mention that he had absolutely no intention of stepping one foot inside her house.

Suddenly, Mrs Weasley looked over his shoulder and her eyes hardened even as her mouth straightened.

“Boys!” she bellowed before bustling off after her errant twins.

“I didn’t know you were going to the Weasley’s for part of your holiday,” Hermione commented as the two of them began moving towards the barrier to the muggle world.

“I’m not,” Harry stated flatly. “That’s all Dumbledore’s plan and I’m having nothing to do with it. Professor McGonagall told me to just play along with the idea for now and make everyone think that I was going to do what they have planned. I suspect that Dumbledore’s going to get a nasty surprise when I don’t do what he expects.”

“So they haven’t told him that he’s not your guardian anymore?” Hermione asked.

“No,” he replied, with a shake of his head, “although I don’t know how much longer they can keep it a secret.”

They paused then to wait for their turn through the barrier.

Once through, Harry craned his head, trying to see past the crowds, but if Sirius and Remus were there, they were currently hidden from view.


After Hermione gave him a pointed nudge, Harry nodded and followed the mousey-haired boy across the hall.

“Mum! Dad!” Colin yelled, waving one hand.

Harry quickened his pace and reached out to steady Colin’s trolley with the hand not holding on to Hedwig’s cage.
“Colin!” a slightly smaller boy yelled before rushing at what could only be his big brother and leaping at him.

“Hey, Dennis,” Colin said, ruffling the boy’s hair.

“Mum, Dad, Dennis, this is Harry Potter,” Colin introduced.

“Hello, Harry, it’s very nice to meet you at last. Colin’s told us so much about you,” Mrs Creevey smiled.

“Harry,” Colin cut in, “this is my brother, Dennis. He’ll be starting at Hogwarts the year after next.”

“Hi, Dennis, it’s nice to meet you,” Harry replied, shaking the boy’s hand.

After a few minutes, Harry deftly excused himself to make his way over towards where Hermione was waiting with her parents. On his way across, he was greeted by Cyrus Greengrass giving him a respectful nod. Beside him was an older woman who bore a striking resemblance to Daphne and a younger girl with her father’s black hair and brilliant blue eyes.

“Hello, Harry. How was your year?” Emma Granger greeted him as he joined them.

“It had its ups and downs, Mrs Granger. How have you both been?” he smiled.

“We’ve been well, Harry,” Dan Granger replied, shaking his hand.

“We can’t stay long, dear,” Emma warned her daughter.

Immediately, Hermione turned to Harry. “You’ll write, won’t you? Even when we’re away on holidays?”

“Of course I will, Hermione,” he replied and then, on impulse, he turned to her parents. “I hope you don’t mind, but I really need to talk to Hermione for a minute.”

Emma’s small smile and wave was enough of a permission for Harry to grab hold of Hermione’s hand and to lead her away from the crowd a bit. When he was sure that they couldn’t be overheard, he stopped and faced her.

“Look, Hermione,” he began, looking anywhere but at her eyes where he really wanted to be looking. “You’re my best friend.”

“You’re my best friend, too, Harry,” Hermione smiled.

He nodded before pressing on. “And we get on really well together. I really enjoy spending time with you and I think you do too.” Her nod confirmed that thought. “So, look …”

He trailed off and started to rub the back of his neck.

“What is it, Harry?” Hermione said gently, once more taking the hand that he’d let go. “You can tell me anything, Harry. You know that.”

Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself. Where’s that Gryffindor courage, Harry?

Finally, he managed to lock on to her chocolate brown eyes. “Hermione, would you …”

“Ah, Harry, there you are,” Professor Dumbledore interrupted grasping his upper arm.
“What are you doing here?” Harry nearly growled in his frustration.

“Why Harry, I’m merely here to escort you to your Aunt and Uncle’s place,” Dumbledore twinkled.

“But I’m not going back to my Aunt and Uncle’s,” Harry snapped. “And I was in the middle of a conversation with Hermione.”

“Very well, we have a couple of minutes,” Dumbledore said lightly.

Harry’s face darkened as he stared at the old man invading his personal space. Dumbledore however, never took the hint. In exasperation, he turned back to Hermione, but there was no way that he could continue now. Hermione, too, looked frustrated by the Headmaster’s continued looming presence.

After a couple of minutes of awkward silence, Dumbledore spoke up.

“Perhaps you can finish your conversation in a letter,” he suggested. “We really need to be getting along, Harry. Your relatives will be expecting us.”

“Headmaster,” Harry said through gritted teeth. “I am not going to my Aunt and Uncle’s place. You heard the magical vow that I made. You know that I’ll lose my magic if I stay with them.”

“Pish posh, Mister Potter,” Dumbledore waved off his protests. “I’m certain that it wasn’t an actual magical vow that you made. Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“It was, Headmaster,” Hermione said. “I was there. I heard it and I saw the light from his wand.”

“Besides, if it wasn’t a magical vow, then how come I ended up in that hearing for doing underage magic?” Harry argued.

“Harry, I am the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and I can assure you that whatever occurred was not a magical vow,” Dumbledore stated flatly, a hint of steel creeping into his voice. “Now, come along.”

Once more, Harry’s upper arm was captured by Dumbledore. Harry tried to pull it free only to find the old man’s grip to be like iron. As Dumbledore began to walk towards the closest pillar, Harry found himself being pulled along.

A tightness in his chest flared up as he began to panic. He whipped his head around, trying and failing to find either Sirius or Remus. He attempted to dig his feet in, only to feel them slipping along the tiled floor. Hedwig squawked as her cage swung violently in his hand.

“Harry!” Hermione called, panic clear in her voice.

“What’s going on here?” Harry heard Mister Granger ask angrily.

“There is nothing to concern yourself with,” Dumbledore replied. “As Harry’s guardian I am simply fulfilling my duty to take him to his relatives. Behind here, I think.”

As Dumbledore began to manoeuvre Harry towards a small alcove, Harry’s rage and frustration felt as though they were going to overwhelm him. He wanted nothing more than for the old fool to let him go. He was really starting to struggle now and pull violently at his arm.

“NO!” Harry screamed and around him the world went red.

A brilliant flare of red energy erupted from Harry, centred on the hand that held his upper arm. Immediately, the pressure eased as Dumbledore was sent flying. Harry watched wide-eyed as the old
man flew through the air to crash spectacularly into a concrete column nearly twenty feet away. On impact, he seemed to freeze momentarily before slowly sliding down to land in a heap of purple and gold robes on the ground.

Spinning around, Harry surveyed the rest of the results of his latest burst of accidental magic. Everyone in a radius of forty feet had been knocked to the ground. In a panic, he rushed to where Hermione lay and grasped her hand. Her bushy brown hair was splayed out around her head and her eyes were closed.

“Oh, Hermione, please be alright, please be alright,” he repeated over and over.

At her soft moan, he sighed in relief.

Half a dozen sudden cracks echoed around the hall and Harry’s head whipped up. Red-robed aurors were appearing, obviously in response to the massive magical surge in a highly muggle area.

Harry didn’t need to be told what that meant. He was in trouble. Big trouble. He’d been warned what would happen if he ever did underage magic again – he was probably already expelled from Hogwarts and as soon as the aurors laid hands on him, his wand was going to be snapped and his magic bound.

His eyes darted about. Dumbledore was still down and unconscious. Mister Granger was helping an unsteady Mrs Granger to her feet. Mister Greengrass looked to be arguing with a pair of aurors. Others were either still either lying where they’d fallen or were staring about them in confusion, both magical and muggle folk alike.

Seeing the exit within a few steps of where he knelt, Harry knew that he only had one option. As quickly as his fingers could work, he set Hedwig free. A whispered word in her ear and she soared out through the doors.

“I’m sorry Hermione,” he whispered to the still unconscious girl.

Then, after an impulsive kiss to her cheek, Harry Potter grabbed Hedwig’s empty cage, leapt to his feet and disappeared through the doors into muggle London.

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