Summary

Charlotte James "Charley" Potter was used to things going sideways in her life—especially on Halloween. Usually, Voldemort was involved.

Her (Very, very—Right?) dead parents were never involved. Until they were, that is.

Only, she's still entered in the Triwizard Tournament, Neville and Hermione have been acting stranger than usual, and she's starting to suspect Voldemort's behind quite a lot of it. Business as usual for Charlotte Potter, quite honestly.

Only, she's never had a family on her side, before. And it's over James Potter and Lily Evans's dead bodies their daughter will be hurt again, by anyone.

OR: Where no one's quite sure what happened other than weird magic stuff, Lily refuses to
take bullshit of any kind, James is going to fix the Wizengamot if it's the last thing he does (As well as possibly curse Lucius Malfoy into next week), and everyone's a little bit broken —particularly Charlotte Potter.

But, she's suspecting she might finally begin to heal. Eventually.
"Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine, and at last you create what you will."

-George Bernard Shaw

The ward had become a little bit sentient.

That wasn't normally the case, of course. As a rule, magic lacked a thinking mind; left to its own devices, it was simply energy: inert and subject to the predictable, stable laws of the universe, both magical and mundane. No messy emotions involved. But, when you added life—added magic-users—that reasoned and learned and felt, things got tricky. Fast.

Protective enchantments were usually an exception.

In all actuality, they were rather dull in this respect, constantly doing what was expected of them and no more.

It was, normally, the most reliable area of enchantment to be found in practice today. They were, normally, considered a constant mainstay in any magic user's arsenal. Normally, the only independent action taken by such wards was to fade. Normally, a ward acting independently beyond their explicit function was impossible.

Blood Wards, however, had never been normal.

And the Potters had always possessed a talent for the impossible.

The Childe was endangered.

This was not new to its Protector. (Danger had dogged the Childe's path for years—)

The threats had been many, over time, from the malice of the ignorant and small-minded, to those actively seeking to do the Childe fatal harm. Some of had been small pricks of the side of the Childe's Protector, but many, many more had been larger, and stretched the Protector to its very limits.

Most wards, unattended like the Childe's Protector had been, would have faded long ago in the face of it all, yielding as even magic eventually must.

But the Childe would have been left alone against the darkness.

And the Protector's Creator had cared-worried-for loved the Childe very much.
So, the Childe's Protector had stayed. Helped the Childe as much as it could, directing the Childe towards partners, guards, allies, and friends, guiding it as much as its Protector could through the years, saving it from cruelty, harm, and black magic!

The Creator's anger born from love echoed through the Childe's Protector again.

That had happened often as the Childe had begun to grow into its heritage. As it had become both ever more connected to those who would help if allowed, and ever more alone.

Ever more hardened.

Alas, the Childe's Protector, for all its inherent power found in blood rituals and family magic, could only follow the imperative laid down by the Protector's Creator: Protect the Childe from danger. (Keep her safe)

A short directive, but clear nonetheless. Act in defense only when there is a threat to the life of the Childe (No matter how much it feels), to do all it could to remove the danger to the Childe and its well-being. All within the laws of magic.

Like the Childe's protector could do anything else, as always. Except...

The Threat was back. Again. (And taking. Always, always taking —)

The Threat was coming.

Fleeing, from a death it so richly deserved.

The Childe did not know. Not yet. But its Protector did. And it... considered.

Not think, of course. (That was impossible, after all. Wards did not feel, did not imagine, and did not think) The Childe's Protector merely... considered its options. Or rather, it considered why it waited before making an action now, when before, flaring first and considering later had protected the Childe perfectly well.

The Threat.

Well, it was always the Threat, was it not? Always creating the most danger to the Childe. But that was nothing new. (There was the anger again; it felt different. More real. How peculiar —)

There was something, though. Something—different. More genuine. Larger than before. Less the consecrated remnants of a broken shadow, more the forging of a new one. A stronger one.

And that storm was coming for the Childe, emerging from the flames of a goblet like a phoenix reborn.

How dare they —

The Childe was the Protector's, the Creator's —

They could not have her.
Emotions. That . . . would be useful, actually, the sentient ward considered.

The Childe's Protector could not fend the storm off alone with magic. Alone, the Childe would perish, facing the Threat. And that was unacceptable, a failure of purpose. (*Of family, of love—*)

The original enchantment was insufficient. It did not dictate how to outmaneuver a threat, let alone the Threat.

Something more would have to be done. But there was no ready answer within the Protector's original enchantment. *More would have to be done*

Within the rules of magic, there was no allowance for the Childe's Protector to reason, to *will* a way to protect the Childe. Bound by the rules, it could only react, follow orders. (*Like a good little soldier—*)

It was a good thing the Potters had never particularly cared for rules.

Lily Marie Evans had cared even less, when it suited her.

*And who better to protect than those who did not allow themselves to be bound by rules?*

Emotion and magic were a tricky combination. The Creator had known this, the Protector considered; where there was hatred and magic, there was little that could not be done, could not be *willed*.

But where there was love and magic, there was nothing that could not be done.

And so the Childe's Protector reached out. It *willed.*
Charley Potter hated Halloween.

Nothing good ever came out of the holiday, whether it was a Defense professor releasing a Mountain Troll, the Chamber of Secrets opening and a Defense Professor being useless, or a supposed mass murderer breaking into the castle—and no one telling her that he had been the best friend of her father and the Defense Professor. Really, just Defense Professor being in the same vicinity as the holiday was a bad idea.

Hermione Granger had once suggested doing a study, to determined if there was a real correlation between DADA professors and incidents on what wizards called Samhain. Ron Weasley had replied that he had no idea what a 'scievivic study' was, but it'd probably guarantee that they'd all be dead by Christmas.

Charley had privately agreed with Ron. She was enough of a bad luck magnet as it was.

But at the thought of her classmate, she took another slow bite from her treacle tart, and reconsidered the very first Halloween incident. Well, the troll maybe hadn't been all bad.

Ron had lightened up considerably on Hermione afterward in First Year, and who knew where they would have been without him at the end of their First Year? Also, Quidditch.

She would have been so, so, incredibly screwed without Ron in learning proper Quidditch tactics. Hermione had never liked Quidditch, Neville disliked anything that took him off the ground, and while Oliver Wood had been a brilliant Quidditch Captain for Gryffindor, he had also been a quite frankly insane Quidditch Captain for Gryffindor. Charley had lost track of the number of times she had fallen asleep against George or Angelina during their early morning lectures in the middle of the season. Absolutely nothing had stuck in her brain, other than Oliver Wood was one of the most terrifying people she had ever met, and that Puddlemere United had no idea what they were getting in him.
Ron, though, had—however reluctantly—explained to her how to dodge Beaters, quickly find the Snitch, and just what in the world a Sloth Grip Roll was.

But even with the troll gaining Charley a new friend for all of that, Defense professors and Halloween were still just a bit not good, she decided, and just a horrible idea all around, really.

She turned to say as much to Neville, a slight smile on her lips as she remembered the incident. Neville only looked thoughtful as he chewed on his apple pie, while Parvati Patil shuddered across the table from them.

"You're not the only one to hate it, Charley. After a troll, petrified animals, and Sirius Black? I start to wonder which is worse: Hogwarts on Samhain with a new professor—at least this one's a former Auror—or that arranged marriage Mama's been talking about."

Charley made a sympathetic hum, listening absentmindedly while finishing her treacle tart. Parvati spent a whole five minutes ranting in detail about her apparent prospective fiancé, who was apparently very rich—"Two whole vaults in Gringotts' international branch—as well as very old—"He's old enough to be my grandfather, let alone my father—but the worst crime of all it would seem was—Crabbe is better looking than him, and I'd kiss a toad over Crabbe any day—that he was ugly, irredeemably so.

Charley determinedly didn't look at Neville as she bit her lip. While the prospective fiancé was a real problem, Parvati's priorities had always been . . . interesting, when compared to hers.

Also, if Lavender Brown was to be believed, Parvati and Padma had spent half of last summer attempting to convince most of their immediate family that they didn't need to get married before the age of twenty, and Parvati had been threatening to hex any prospective suitors by August.

On one hand, Charley couldn't help but feel sorry for the poor man. Parvati was a right terror angry, and Indian curses were no joke, as their entire year knew after the Kali Incident—Cormac McLaggen's eyebrows had never quite grown back, despite the best efforts of Madame Pomfrey.

On the other hand, Charley considered, he was trying to marry her friend, a teenager who had absolutely no desire to get married before the age of seventeen.

On second thought, he deserved every curse Parvati could think of, and few more she couldn't, Charley decided as Parvati continued.

But to her surprise—though, why she was surprised anymore, she wasn't quite sure—Hermione was the one who ended Parvati's now full-blown rant as she questioned, "Aren't arranged marriages no longer used by British wizards? According to Mattering Manners: A Guide to Proper Wizard Etiquette by Catriona Elphick, they are considered to be superfluous and quite archaic in modern times by pureblood wizards, and were ever only used to consolidate power during unstable times and to protect their holdings. Only the Blacks, Gaunts, and Lestranges even openly discussed them in the last century and a half."

At this, Parvati looked a bit less angry, though rather more confused than before, and Charley couldn't blame her. Hermione was her best friend and completely brilliant.

"I, I don't know, to be honest," Parvati admitted, looking to Charley, Neville and Ron helplessly. Charley quickly took another bite of her tart to try and hide her ignorance, while Ron only gave a shrug.

"The British Wizarding Government pulled out of India twenty years before the Muggles did, but
still had to deal with Gellert Grindelwald, k-keeping a lot of power in the area at the same time. Magical India's also always been rather conservative, and l-likes change less than we do," Neville chimed in nervously. "Most Indian wizards also p-put some stock in organized r-religion, which encourages them to maintain their old ways. Really, they haven't really seen major political upheaval since r-right after Grindelwald, and arranged marriages are still heard of there."

Silence fell over their particular area of the Gryffindor table as Charley, Parvati and Ron all stared at a fiercely blushing Neville, while Hermione sharply demanded, "How did you know that, Neville? Neither Professor Binns nor the textbook mention anything like that."

*He was still rather helpless under Hermione's need-knowledge-now glare,* Charley thought, trying to stifle a chuckle as a panicked look crossed Neville's face. Turns out, recently-realized crushes the size of Hogwarts didn't make you any more immune to that glare than the rest of them.

Unfortunately—maybe for the best—Hermione had no clue, and Charley had willingly been sworn to silence on that matter.

Of course, if the day ever came that *Hermione Granger* decided that she liked Neville Longbottom—Actually, Charley wasn't going there, horror at the possible fallout stopping her laughter.

"Oh, don't stop on my account. What's so funny, Charley?" Hermione snapped, after Neville managed to stutter out some indecipherable sentence involving his Gran to the enraged fellow fourth-year. "Do tell. I could use a good laugh, after finding out about yet another gaping hole in our magical education!"

"To be fair Hermione, we already knew Binns was useless," The bespectacled brunette remarked, putting the remains of her treacle tart aside. "Now, we know he's—"

But, Charley was never able to tell Hermione her opinion of their ghostly professor, as she, along with the rest of the Great Hall fell into an expectant silence when Professor Dumbledore—speaking of useless teachers, Charley thought bitterly. She wasn't sure she'd ever forgive him for believing *Snape* over them about Sirius last year—rose along with Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime out of their seats, their bodies tense, and faces expectant. In contrast, Ludo Bagman was winking and smiling, acting like he was at a Quidditch match, while Mr. Crouch merely looked bored with the entire thing, looking more severe than ever.

"The Goblet is nearly ready with its decisions," announced Professor Dumbledore, as he dimmed the lights in the Great Hall until only the blue flames of the Goblet and white stars above remained. "It requires approximately one minute more."

As Dumbledore began to instruct the Tri-Wizard candidates on what to do in the event of their being chosen as a Champion, Charley couldn't help but let her mind wander to the possibility of a peaceful Halloween for once. After all, they'd eaten without interruption, she hadn't snuck out to another Deathday Party, and there was no mass-murdering lunatic breaking into the castle. Best of all, the DADA teacher, Professor Moody, was an actual Auror, a friend of the Headmaster's, no less. What *could* possibly happen?

It wasn't like she'd submitted her name to the Goblet.

Charley was jolted out of her reverie at Lee Jordan's whisper of "Any second," as it pierced the air. *Right.* The Champions still needed to be selected before she could fully relax, safe in her bed back in the girls' dormitory. Her peaceful Halloween was nearly over. But not yet.
"Viktor Krum!"

The Great Hall burst into raucous applause, as the Goblet's flames reverted from ruby to blue, every Quidditch fan in Hogwarts cheered, and a rather duck-footed boy—well, young man, really, he looked as if he would tower over even Ron or Dean—walked up to Dumbledore to accept his place as Durmstrang's Champion.

Even over the applause and ruckus, Charley could hear Durmstrang's Headmaster booming his praise, declaring Krum's abilities to anyone who would listen, and quite a few who wouldn't.

Charley clapped politely while Ron whistled, Hermione rolled her eyes, and Parvati gained a distinctly mercenary look in her eye, studying the seventeen-year-old Seeker before whispering something to giggling Lavender Brown. *Oh, no. I know that look.*

Viktor Krum gave Dumbledore and Karkaroff a curt nod, and left as everyone's focus shifted back to the goblet once more.

Unconsciously, Charley checked her holster, a gift from Professor Lupin last Christmas, for her wand.

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"Fleur Delacour!"

This time, the applause was intermingled with sobs from the French visitors at the Ravenclaw table, Charley observed. Several girls and one or two of the boys from Beauxbatons let loose melodramatic wails

"They're rather disappointed about it, aren't they?" Hermione commented, while Fleur Delacour—who must have had some Veela blood in her, to look like *that*—made her way to the side chamber as Beauxbatons' Champion, Maxime looking on proudly.

*That's a bit of an understatement,* Charley thought as she watched one Beauxbatons girl sob into her muffler over at Ravenclaw, moaning to several increasingly unsympathetic onlookers as they tried to ignore her and turn their attention back to Dumbledore. A hush fell over all four Houses as the Goblet began to spark and crackle.

With little thought for her actions, Charley carefully turned her back right so that it completely faced Neville, rather than Slytherin House. Neville looked at her curiously, but didn't say anything.

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"Cedric Diggory!"

All of Hufflepuff House roared as every last one sprang to their feet, while the grinning Prefect strode up and into the side chamber, taking his place as Hogwarts' Champion. But even as Ron moaned in disappointment over Angelina Johnson losing out, and Hermione and Neville were willingly swept up in the fervor of the Badgers, Charley cheered Diggory on as fiercely as any Hufflepuff, watching as he gave a wide grin to Dumbledore before walking into the chamber contain all three Champions, the cheers from Hogwarts barely abating after he left.

The celebration of the popular sixth-year, in fact went on for so long, that it took two fireworks from the Headmaster's wand before Dumbledore could make himself heard once more, much to the amusement of Charley, Hermione, and Neville.

But even as she celebrated Cedric's victory, she could feel her heart begin to pound and her body tense, as if an attack were imminent.
"Excellent, most fantastic!" Professor Dumbledore proclaimed. "Well. As we now have our three Tri-Wizard Champions—"

The silver-bearded professor was forced to pause for a minute in his speech, while students of Hogwarts, Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons all cheered. Charley attempted deep breaths.

"Yes, yes, all three will be magnificent competitors, I am sure. I am also equally sure I can rely upon every student from all three of your grand educational institutions to give Mister Krum, Miss Delacour, and Mister Diggory every ounce of support you can muster, for they surely deserve it. By doing so, you will all be able to contribute—"

The sapphire flames of the Goblet flared red one last time.

A burnt piece of parchment flew out of the ruby fire.

The Headmaster caught the parchment, and after some seconds, read a fourth name out loud, his face unreadable.

The Great Hall held naught but an accusatory silence, except for the footsteps of a lone student.

"Charlotte Potter."
James Potter woke up screaming at the darkness.

It took a minute for his hysteria to pass; another for his training to kick in. Eventually, something vaguely resembling a clear mind set in as he managed to bite off his screaming.

Once the veneer of calm settled in, he managed to begin to actually think, and with much unease, without a tinge of hysteria at all, analyzed his situation as he experimented trying to move his arms, only to be stopped by what felt like wooden walls. That was... new.

James took the moment to take a deep breath and review the facts he knew, fighting the urge to squeeze his eyes shut like a child against the oppressive blackness, hearing his heart pounding away in his ears.

Fact: The last thing he remembered doing was yelling at Lily to take Charlotte and run.

Fact: The last thing he remembered seeing was the Dark Wanker himself, looking as murderous as ever.

Fact: The last thing he remembered hearing was Avada Kedavra.

Fact: Voldy-shorts had cast the Killing Curse.

Fact: He should have died. Had died?

Fact: Peter Pettigrew, Wormtail, had betrayed them.

Fact: He was somewhere dark, enclosed, and in fact looked eerily like the inside of a coffin.

Additional Fact: His Animagus form was a wild animal that was claustrophobic.

Conclusion: He was utterly fucked.

And James then proceeded to have a panic attack.
Well, he wasn't quite fucked, James amended mentally, after managing to work himself down, struggling to take deep, slow breaths.

Not yet, anyway.

If James was right, he seemed to be stuck—read: buried—in a regular wooden coffin in a set of his nicer robes, presumable with about two meters' worth of dirt right above him. Happy thoughts, Potter. Those were not happy thoughts.

James told the Moony in his head to shut it, and began to shift around to look for his glasses and wand.

If Remus and Sirius had followed magical tradition, his wand should have been left with him in his coffin—Merlin, that was creepy to think about—and he should be able to blast his way to the surface with minimal damage; and all of it was possible because great-great-great-great-great-grandfather Harry was paranoid, wonderful ancestor he was.

James fought the brief urge to laugh; he was pretty sure he didn't have the air to spare, considering the corners looked airtight.

It was only one reason among many, however. Prongs was still twitchy at the back of his mind, and James couldn't blame him. Or was it myself? This never gets less confusing.

Unless you're Padfoot, the smug git.

James quickly found his mahogany wand settled to his left, with his glasses right behind it. Without a second thought, he slammed his glasses onto his face, grimacing at the dust coating the lenses before he palmed his wand into his left hand, feeling the familiar rush of warmth from it.

Now, Reductor Curse or Bombarda Charm? Looked like a "particular proclivity for pyrotechnics" was going to pay off, he thought amusedly. If Professor McGonagall could see me now...

But could she? James had seen the amount of dust on his glasses and wand. He remembered his training under Senior Aurors, and how to tell the passage of time without magic. After getting out of his own grave, he'd have to go find Lily and Charlotte, wherever they were now—whenever now was.

For all he knew, he could've been there for over a decade, or a week. And then... he wasn't quite sure, if he was being honest. But James felt relatively confident he would come up with something, especially with Lily Evans on his side.

James did not entertain the possibility they were dead. Lily and Charlotte were alive, he had decided. They simply had to be.

And with that, he pointed his wand at the ceiling of his coffin and prayed to Merlin as he muttered a soft Reducto.

A low boom sounded, and James flinched as an avalanche of splinters and earth crashed down upon him, quickly casting a Bubble Head Charm to spare his face. Then, he went to work. Vanishing Spells, Shield Charms, and Reductor Curses, all along with a Hardening Charm for good luck.

Soon, he had managed to create a relatively stable hole for him to climb out of, but the spellwork left James seeing spots as he looked up at the night sky when he hauled himself to his feet.

Apparently, performing magic after kicking the bucket who knows how long ago was an easy way
to knock yourself out, quite literally.

And with that rather annoying realization, James was forced to reassess his options. He couldn't afford to Splinch himself, and certainly couldn't rest right now, not when he still had to find his family, and was so close to getting away from what remained of the coffin. Better do this bit the Muggle way, then.

After sticking his wand up his sleeve, he reached up as high as his height allowed, managing to get a grip on the now-stone walls, and pulled himself up, scrabbling for a minute until his feet found footholds. Looking up, he could just make out in the darkness that he still had roughly half a meter before reaching the surface.

Maybe. He only had the light of a waning crescent moon to see with, considering he couldn't exactly reach for his wand right now.

Suddenly, a ledge crumbled beneath his left foot, forcing him to desperately cling to the walls, doing everything he could not to fall as he re-adjusted his grip, his arms shaking and hands sweaty as he sought purchase.

Right. Constant vigilance, Potter. What would Mad-Eye say? For that matter, what would Sirius say?

He'd call me an old man and tell me I'm losing my touch, that's what.

Reinvigorated by the thought of his best friend, James carefully re-adjusted first his right leg, then his left, setting them as high as he dared. Then, all at once, he launched himself to the surface, and reaching over the edge, he grasped the wet grass, pulling with every ounce of stubborn will he possessed, trying to drag himself to the surface completely.

But it just wasn't enough.

James felt his muscles scream as his hands slowly began to slip from the grass, unable to move forward. He could only hold on as his hands—along with the rest of him—slid back.

Back into the pit he had fought to leave.

Back towards his grave.

But just as he was about to fall, a pair of pale, dust-smeared hands seemingly appeared out of nowhere, grasped his wrists, and yanked him back out of the hole.

Both James and his rescuer were sent sprawling over the damp grass, away from the thrice-damned hole in the ground.

Thank Merlin. And... them, as well, actually.

Whoever they are. I'm sure they're lovely.

James turned over onto his back, heaving as he struggled for breath. As the crisp air filled his lungs, and his aches began to fade a little, James managed to sit up and look around to thank his savior.

His savior, who happened to be pointing a familiar wand at him and, he dazedly noted, looked rather like his wife, red hair and all.

Wait.
What?

Oh. That is your wife, you git.

James began to clumsily stand up, but was quickly stopped due to the end of a willow wand suddenly being not two centimeters from his nostrils, and he rather liked those as they were, thank you very much.

"Lily?" James whispered hoarsely.

"What is your Animagus form?" Oh, she looked angry now. And rather dirty, come to think of it. Her clothes looked to be torn in places, and her long hair was covered in dust.

She was the most beautiful sight James had ever seen; the bubbling annoyance, dirt, clear exhaustion, and blatant disregard for any of it as she glared at him only identified her further as the woman James did not deserve in any way.

"You want me to tell you my Animagus form? Well, Lils, you know how it is," he began, recovering some of his swagger. "What with—OW!"

Stinging Hexes hurt.

"Don't give me that bullshit, Potter," she growled, readjusting her grip on her wand. "Your Animagus. Form. Now. Before I change my mind and decide you're a Death Eater."

James blinked. "Lily, what are you talking about—"

Wait. The might-have-been resurrection must have scrambled his brains. That, or he was an idiot. Possibly both.

Fact: She thought he was an imposter.

Fact: She was dressed in a nicer set of robes, similar to him.

Fact: She was covered in dirt. About as much as he was, actually, if not more.

Fact: In the middle of the night, she had been in the same cemetery as James, saving his skin as needed.

Conclusion: He really, really didn't want to go there right now.

Changing tactics and tracks of thought before she decided to go ahead and hex him, James raised his hands and answered quickly, "A stag, it's a stag, please don't kill me, dear."

Lily relaxed, lowering her wand. She didn't holster it, however, as James shakily rose to his feet, and she looked about as tired as he felt as she sagged almost imperceptibly.

Quietly, he stepped forward and tucked his arm around her waist, pressing his face into her hair and breathing in. The pair all-too-briefly leaned on each other for a long minute before bracing themselves for whatever came next.

Finally, they turned to leave the graveyard, Lily and James paused briefly to observe what appeared their—well, their gravestone, James realized. He hated it on sight.

It was white marble, somber and humble, with only their names, the requisite dates, and a short quote to sum up their lives. Simple, solemn, and with a statement that James found to be verging on
pompous.

Otherwise known as everything James and Lily had never been.

*What kind of nonsense is "the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death", anyway? Did Moony
decide to try and get all poetic there?*

He said as much, and Lily shrugged helplessly.

"I don't particularly like it either, James but... grief. They did what they thought best, and what they
could."

James nodded slowly, his heart heavy in his chest. Both of them knew the feeling as an old
acquaintance, after the years of battle against Voldemort.

James prayed to half-remembered gods from his childhood that Charlotte never had, wherever she
was now. Not like he and Lily had been forced to learn to learn.

Though, speaking of the red-haired witch, James *did* have a question.

"How did you pull me out of the hole? You're not exactly tall, Lily-flower."

At this, the previously contemplative redhead turned with an eyebrow arched. "Height is no
guarantee of strength or efficiency, James. Besides, after getting myself out, I—"

Lily paused, her face turning white as her eyes focused on something over James's shoulder, as he
whipped his head around, his wand out and ready for whatever threat Lily had reacted to.

And then promptly almost dropped it when he saw what she had seen.

Their house, *their home*, looking like it had been the heart of a war zone in Godric's Hollow.

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*No. Please, not Charlotte, anyone but her.  
Step aside, you foolish Mudblood.  

Voldemort's words echoed through Lily Evans Potter's head as she and her husband sprinted out of
the cemetery, across the mercifully empty dark streets of Godric's Hollow, under the dim street lights,
all the way to the decrepit mess that she and James had called home, had hoped against hope to raise
a family in peace.  

*It's him! Lily, take Charlotte and run!*  

And it was because of that hope that once she got to the rotting fence she and Alice Longbottom had
painted one day, Lily collapsed against it with a dry sob as she saw the damage in more detail.

The shingled roof was completely collapsed, and even in the dark, she could see that every window
—those glazed windows that James had made Sirius do by hand after he lost some *stupid* bet she
could no longer remember—were blown out. The door was no longer there, and debris was simply
everywhere.

The frumpy curtains Marlene and Peter had picked out one day for them as a gift—and this, and all
of this, meant Peter, James's brother in all but blood, had betrayed them, meant he had as good as
killed their daughter, and Lily would *destroy* him for it—
Wreck was too kind a word for the the house and the shattered life it represented.

No child, not even a magical one, could have survived that. Not without help a Dark wizard would never have given.

Charlotte Potter was dead.

Charlotte, her darling baby girl, was gone. Lily would never see the laughing toddler she had died for again, never see her grow up, never see if she would have James's sense of humor, Lily's knack for Charms, never see her truly live.

Her sobs wracked her body as James sunk to beside her, clutching her hand like a lifeline, his eyes fixed on the gate, unseeing as he reached the same conclusion.

Why did they get brought back, or whatever the hell happened, and their daughter had to stay dead? Why?

"Lily. Lily! Look at this."

"What, James?" The grieving redhead snapped. "Our daughter is dead. Am I not allowed to grieve?"

"Yes, yes you can!" James exclaimed as he moved closer, brushing some dust—more gods-damned dust—off of the gate. "But that's the thing. I don't think she's dead. Look at this."

"Look at what, James? Some delinquent's artwork?" she asked bitterly. Lily couldn't see the point in investigating some worthless graffiti about someone called the Girl-Who—wait. What.

James—the wise man—moved quickly out of the way as she dove for the gate desperately, inspecting it more closely.

In a state of complete disbelief and burgeoning fragile hope, she carefully read the graffiti as if it were scripture, her hand shaking as she brushed away more dirt and detritus to reveal scrawled messages and comments, dozens of them, all addressed to the Girl-Who-Lived—Charlotte Potter.

"She's alive," Lily breathed, nearly collapsing against the gate again in relief. "She's alive, James."

Her husband was no better, staring at the gate as if it—well, as if it had told him his only child was alive.

Thank God, Merlin, and whoever else was listening.

She turned to James, the same question going through their heads.

"What now, do you think?"

"We'll go to Dumbledore. He's forgotten more magic then either of us have ever learned, always looked out for us. He'll be able to help," said James determinedly, before he gently added, "He'll also be able to tell us what happened to the Prongslet, where she is."

And, unsurprisingly, it was James Potter's horrendous ideas of what constituted a good name that dispelled the last of Lily's premature grief.

"Don't call her that." Lily groaned with a pained expression. "She has a perfectly wonderful name. How you and Sirius got into your heads Charlotte needed a ridiculous moniker like that I'll never know."
James grinned. "Ah, you love it, Lily-flower. Besides, you were the one who said Harriet was out."

"Yes, let's give our only daughter a name that will be roundly mocked the entire time she's at school, what a simply brilliant idea."

"Consider it motivation to become the next great Marauder. I need an heir, anyway," James responded flippantly.

"Potter, the world still can't deal with four of you," Lily deadpanned as she fought to hide a silly grin at his ridiculous ideas. James had always fought to keep her laughing, keep her fighting; Lily doubted she would ever truly deserve him. "I dread to think how it will take more of you."

James looked at her, a hopeful grin on his lips. "Does that mean we can have another? Could we name him Charlie Sirius?"

Lily tilted her head to the side in faux consideration as she laughed. "I believe Molly and Arthur got there first."

The outrageous man's hopeful grin became triumphant. "That wasn't a no, love."

"Let's find the first one before we try a second, yes?"

But Lily sobered at the thought of Charlotte before the words were fully out of her mouth, and felt almost guilty all of a sudden. Here they were, flirting in front of their destroyed home in the middle of the night, while their daughter was Merlin knew where, believed an orphan.

"So. Hogwarts, then?" James questioned, his face serious once more.

"Hogwarts." Lily agreed gravely.

Hopefully, Albus Dumbledore could give them answers on their apparent resurrection as well as what had happened on Halloween; particularly, just what had happened to their daughter.

With no small amount of desperate hope, James and Lily stepped out on to the streets of Godric's Hollow once more, and clasped each other's hands tightly in wordless agreement before Apparating to the gates of Hogwarts.
"The truth. It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution."

-Professor Albus Dumbledore

"I don't know!" Charley Potter exploded at her oblivious—*dense, really*—year-mates. "But I do know it certainly wasn't me."

"Oh, right, it was a Death Eater," Lavender Brown said with a small smirk tugging at her lips, before giving into a burst of laughter as she brushed her blonde curls out. "Just like last year."

"Lav, that *was* a Death Eater last year. Sirius Black," Sophie Roper corrected without looking up from her magazine, before lifting her face a second later and adding with a sly look in her hazel eyes, "Charlotte—"

"Charley." the enraged Gryffindor bit out.

God, she says it just like Aunt Petunia. Believes me just as often, too, apparently. Thinking of her aunt, though, did nothing to help Charley's already volatile temper.

"Charley." Roper agreed in a placating tone. She opened her mouth to go on, but before she could, Hermione interrupted from behind her Potions textbook, a challenging, angry gleam in her eye.

"Let it alone, Sophie. No one knows who entered Charley's name. She says it wasn't her, and I believe her. Do you honestly think that Charley of all people would want to enter her name into something that guarantees enough attention to overwhelm the Weird Sisters, much less something that will try to constantly kill her."

"Do you have proof?" Roper challenged. "This is a once in a lifetime chance for all of us. Who's to say she didn't decide to try and throw her lot in to earn a bit more fame and some money?"

"I'm her best friend," Hermione said coldly. "And I only need her word."

Charley adored her best friend, sometimes.

Roper, however, narrowed her eyes at Hermione's statement. "If you have no proof one way or another, then stay out of this, Granger."

"Please see my previous statement."
"Leave it, Hermione," Charley told her, before turning to Roper again, who was now smirking. "And I didn't do it. I don't know how it happened, but I didn't want to compete, I don't want the fame or the money, and I really don't want to be a Goddamn Champion."

Charley could barely think straight in her fury at their refusal to believe her. Even Parvati had given her a suspicious look after she had returned to Gryffindor tower, refusing to engage in conversation. Ron had outright accused her of secretly entering her name and hiding the method in order to maximize her chances.

*What, did they all honestly think she had a death wish?*

"Come on, Charley," Roper taunted. "You don't need to lie to us. You can tell us how you did it."

The strawberry blonde abandoned her issue of *Witch Weekly*, stalking across their dormitory her pajamas—crimson and gold, of course—before sitting on Hermione’s bed across from the similarly pajama-clad Charley—a faded blue and grungy white this time.

But before Roper could open her mouth again, the irritated bushy-haired girl gave Roper a push that while relatively weak, startled her on to the floor. Undeterred, she climbed up onto Charley’s bed with an assumed sense of familiarity, coming in closer until Charley was nearly forced to shift back on her bed.

"We'll keep it just between us girls, of course." Roper gave Charley a smile made of coldfire even as she simpered, while Charley glared and debated giving into temptation and hexing her—namely, the odds of Roper hexing the scrawny girl right back. Rather high, if Charley recalled correctly from Second Year.

*Not if she used Bat-Bogey.*

The unbidden thought briefly made Charley feel better as she recalled Hermione’s discovery from two weeks ago, and its subsequent use on the castle poltergeist. Peeves had been making a point of leaving any room with Hermione Granger in it afterward—

"—pretty please, oh Wise Champion of Gryffindor? Just an itty-bitty little hint?" Roper continued to plead, forging on with typical Gryffindor bravery—or perhaps stupidity—ignoring any warning sign written across the other girl's face, continuing to invade her space. And at the blatant dismissal of whatever she said, something within Charley snapped.

"Roper, I can understand you would have a hard time getting this through your head, thick as it is, so I'm going to put this in little words for you. I. Did. Not. Enter," Charley gritted out, getting onto her knees and turning to face the blonde, gesticulating sharply as she spoke.

"I don't know why anyone would think I'd want to enter this death-trap of a Tournament, and I certainly don't know who—not me—entered my name but I do know this: If I really had the death wish you think I do, Roper, I'd have chosen a far more efficient way to off myself than this—ridiculous—FARCE!" she finished, almost inarticulate with anger as she collapsed back against her pillows and almost outright growling at the other girl, "And get off my bed!"

The hazel-eyed Gryffindor didn't need to be told twice, scrambling off and back to the other side of the dormitory as stunned silence filled the room.

Charley didn't waste any time, yanking the curtains around her bed closed as her anger took on a rather vindictive edge at the reaction to her outburst. *They couldn't say she didn't warn them.* Her dislike of fame was notorious within House, and half of Gryffindor had already watched as she had
another version of this little domestic with Ron.

_Seriously, people thought a bloody Fourth Year outwitted an Age Line created by Dumbledore?_ Luna was right, people really _will_ believe anything, Charley couldn't help but think savagely as she smashed her pillow into submission.

Outside what Dumbledore referred to as her, Hermione's, and Neville's "yearly adventure", she was nothing special; hardly the next coming of Merlin everyone painted her to be, nor did she want to be such. Charley had no desire for eternal glory or fame, having already seen what either would get her: permanent pariah status, dead parents, and a dark wizard out for her head.

And it would seem, the school out to crucify her every other year.

Charley sat up and angrily smashed her pillow once more before lying back down and going to sleep. Shortly thereafter, she then began to dream, her scar throbbing.

"_Returned already, Wormtail?_ What did you find at Godric’s Hollow?"

Charlotte Potter began to toss and turn, helplessly trapped in the Dark Lord's mind once more as the domain of Nyx fell over the castle.

"I'm sorry, Albus, you'll have to repeat what you just said because I must have misheard you," Lily Potter began in a low, dangerous tone, "Because there is no way you just said you left my _magical_ daughter with my sister—who, may I remind you, in case you forgot, in addition to fearing anything _remotely_ connected to 'our kind', married a Muggle who was one of the most close-minded men I have ever met in my life. And I spent over two years battling Death Eaters; as a _Muggleborn._"

Dumbledore flinched. James had to fight the brief urge to applaud Lily and her temper as he sat beside her.

"In a phrase—What the _bloody fuck_ were you thinking?!!" Lily finished at a yell, rage etched into every line of her body as she faced the Hogwarts Headmaster.

"Language, dear," James commented absentmindedly. He didn't particularly care, to be honest. To him, the aging Professor deserved it for leaving Charlotte with those—people. However, this _was_ the woman who spent months censoring him and Sirius whenever there was so much as a chance Prongslet was within the same building as a "Merlin's beard".

He'd always enjoyed the humor to be found in irony. Also, his intervention would probably prevent Lily from incinerating Dumbledore with her glare; they _did_ still need to know where their daughter was.

To her credit, James also noted, Lily only spared him a glancing Evans Glare®—presumably, deciding to prioritize—before turning back to the Headmaster. But it did seem the temper had been dialed back a few notches.

"Well, Professor? I'm simply _dying_ to know how you decided that _child abuse_ was the answer to where to place an orphan." Lily asked, sarcasm heavy in her tone.
James winced. He had spoken too soon.

The Headmaster looked an odd mixture of contrite and defensive at Lily’s final barb—two things James had never even seen when he’d told the couple they had to go into hiding back in the war.

*Back in the war. Merlin, that was weird—and wonderful—to think about.* And quite depressing too, if James was being completely honest.

He’d missed thirteen years of his daughter’s life. Thirteen precious years he’d never get back. He would never see Charlotte get her first Hogwarts letter, get her wand, play Quidditch—*Or not. Maybe. She was a Potter*—or even make her first friends. Those things, those memories, they belonged to someone else, someone who hated and feared her for no fault of her own, because *he wasn’t there.* James had failed Charlotte for over a decade in just about every single way that had mattered, and if that didn’t make him want to hex someone into oblivion.

*Using Voldie-kins for target practice would be a good start,* he couldn’t help but think darkly. *Or maybe a certain rat Animagus.*

James had been turning it over in his head since he had woken up in Godric’s Hollow; while he certainly had plenty of rage and burning fury to direct towards Pettigrew, more than any feeling he simply didn’t *understand* it.

But that, James suspected, was a problem that would have to be solved later.

"Well, Professor? My wife did ask you a question, if you would be so kind as to answer it?" he asked, realizing that complete silence had reigned after Lily's last shot. Albus had sagged into his chair, and looked like he had aged another twenty years he couldn't afford. James couldn't help but feel a faint pang of sympathy at the pathetic picture he presented; at his question, the Headmaster looked up.

"James, my boy . . . I hardly know where to start. So much has occurred since your—deaths."

"The beginning would be good." Lily suggested sharply, sharing a quick worried glance with James, the same thought crossing their minds. What was he hiding? There was clearly *something.* Besides, James thought, feeling another spike of guilt, worry, fear and more anger all in one, what could possibly be worse than his daughter being left in the care of Petunia and Vernon Dursley?

James leaned forward in his chair, biting back a groan at the bruises and aches that came from climbing out of your own grave, and a paranoid Poppy Pomfrey before saying gently, "Professor—Albus. It's a simple question. Why the Muggles? Why not Pa—Sirius, or Alice and Frank, or Remus, or—hell, even Andromeda and Ted would have been better."

Lily nodded in agreement, appearing to hold back her maternal rage for now, adding more softly, "It's not like Charlotte's guardians were a matter of life or death, Professor. As long as she was happy and safe, that's all that mattered."

The normally twinkly-eyed Professor turned even sadder at this, remarking, "Oh, Lily. But it was exactly such a matter. That's the thing. To be safe, Charlotte had to go to the Dursleys. I thought you would still remember after your resurrection."

*Had to go to the Dursleys?* What was the man talking about?

James said as much, and at this, the beginnings of confusion crossed Albus’s face before just as quickly leaving.
"James—Lily. It is apparent your memories have been muddled by what seems to be the act of resurrection—quite understandably, since it was quite the burst of magic. Why, I could feel it as I was in discussion with Professors McGonagall and—"

"Professor." Lily cut in, cutting off the budding tangent.

"Ah, yes, of course, my apologies, my mind does tend to wander in my old age . . . Anyway, Madam Pomfrey has already checked the two of you over, and it is clear that the both of you, thankfully, still retain the rest of your memory leading up to the last three months before your . . . deaths."

**Huh. It would seem even the great Albus Dumbledore wasn't sure what to call it,** James couldn't help but think rather vindictively, as the older man paused for a moment.

"Lily, do you recall casting the ward to protect your daughter at the end of July of 1981?"

"Of course, Albus. Not exactly something I plan on forgetting anytime soon. But what—ah." Here, Lily stopped, apparently dumbstruck at her conclusions, a storm of emotion crossing her face before reverting to a state of calm. The same kind, James observed, to be found right before a fight.

"Albus, you cannot possibly have been that stupid."

"My dear, you have to unde—"

"No no no no no, don't you dare to give me that bull, old man. Neither of us have lost our memories. You just happen to have a selective one." At this, James's confusion only increased.

"Lily-flower, would you mind explaining your epiphany to those in the room who did not score a two hundred percent on their Arithmancy NEWT?"

Without taking her eyes off of the Headmaster sitting across from her, the green-eyed woman responded lowly, "Our former Headmaster, in his infinite wisdom, decided with the loss of us, the best way to protect our daughter was to leave her with Petunia in a short-sighted attempt a—"

"Lily, you must—"

"Dumbledore, I don't have to do anything not in the best interests of my family. Any strength to be gained by putting Charlotte in proximity with the last of my blood—which, may I remind you, was far from the only strong anchor for the ward I cast to protect her from Voldemort—"

James snorted. He'd be pissed if Potter magic was anything less.

"—would be outstripped by the benefit of being cared for by trained wizards who—wonder of wonders—actually cared for her, blood relatives or not!"

At this, Lily leaned back into her chair, seemingly exhausted by her rant. James reached over and grasped her right hand firmly, giving her a silent show of support as she shot him a grateful look. **Merlin knows he had deserved every word.**

Professor Dumbledore sighed. "You are correct, Lily. In more ways than one. But so am I."

"But, why those awful people, Albus?" Here, James was straight to the point, picking up the thread of conversation from his exhausted wife. "I mean—Merlin's beard, I certainly have nothing against Muggles, but those two have to be some of the most despicable people I've ever met."
Dumbledore sighed again. "You weren't there after Voldemort's defeat, James. Neither of you were. It was a chaotic time—with Voldemort apparently dead, the war over, the Ministry attempting to separate Death Eaters from the Imperiused—cleaning house, I believe the Muggles say. And at the center of it all, was a child—barely fifteen months—who had somehow, improbably, defeated the most powerful Dark Lord of all time, where so many had died trying. As you can imagine, your daughter was being hailed as a hero, a Savior, if you believed The Daily Prophet—"

This time, Lily was the one holding in a bitter laugh. She, James remembered, had had more than her fair share of entanglements with the newspaper over the course of their lives, fighting against the overt racism espoused by the popular rag.

"And, well. I think I hardly need to go on about what would have been attempted in order to gain control of her."

*No, he didn't.* James could remember the excesses and casual cruelty to be found within his fellow magical aristocrats all too well.

"I could hardly let a child be raised in those circumstances. And with Sirius Black's betrayal—"

This stopped James cold. *But that's impossible. No, he can't mean...*

"Wait, Albus. What are you talking about? Black's betrayal? Surely you don't mean *Sirius*—"

Dumbledore nodded solemnly. "I am terribly sorry, my dear boy."

Lily made a noise like a wounded animal, hands clapped to her mouth as she looked at James.

James felt like he was going to be sick. First, Peter, then Sirius?

*What, will Remus burst through the door now and try to kill me, finish the trfecta?*

Peter's betrayal had cut deep, a wound from a best friend James fully expected to never heal from, but *Sirius*—

It had been different, a deeper bond. Sirius had been his brother in every damn way that mattered.

Or so James had believed.

Dumbledore continued to speak, oblivious to James's self-recriminations. "I can only apologize to both of you. He had us all fooled, and if I had the faintest idea that Sirius had turned Dark, I would never have allowed you to have him as Secret Keeper, and I would never have placed Charlotte in danger like that—"

"Albus," James interrupted, ignoring the icy worry forming in the back of his head as quite a different conclusion began to form. "Sirius was just a decoy. We changed at the last minute after the Fidelius was cast. *Peter* was our Secret Keeper; clearly, it was him who betrayed our location to Voldemort."

James ignored the tightening of his throat as he finally said it out loud, before continuing, "And believe me, the rat's next on the list."

He could handle Pettigrew betraying him. It stung quite a bit to say the least, yes. But more than betraying James, he had knowingly betrayed Lily and Charlotte, his *family*, to their deaths.

He would burn for that, or his name wasn't James Charlus Potter.
What little color Albus Dumbledore had left drained from his face. "Ah."

"Ah, what?" James growled.


Dumbledore shook his head. "James, my boy... I am so sorry. So, so, incredibly sorry."

"For what?" James and Lily demanded desperately at the same time.

"Shortly after Voldemort's defeat, and as Charlotte was being given to Petunia," the Professor began slowly, "Sirius Black was arrested for the murder of Peter Pettigrew and twelve Muggles before being sent to Azkaban without trial, on charge of being a follower of Lord Voldemort, as well as committing multiple murders."

"What?" Lily breathed. James was rendered speechless. *Padfoot... what were you thinking? Were you thinking?* Left in *Azkaban...* James had run into Dementors plenty of times during the war. He had never wished that particular experience upon anyone in his life. And for Sirius?

James almost dreaded to hear anymore. But he had to know.

He leaned forward, worry and fear etched into every line of his body. "Professor, is... is he still alive?"

At this, Dumbledore smiled faintly, nodding, his eyes far away in that moment; strangely, he appeared rather amused.

"Sirius Black escaped Azkaban last year, and has been on the run ever since."

*Well shit, Padfoot. You don't do things half-way, do you? Couldn't let me outdo you by coming back from the dead, James thought, more than slightly hysterical. Just had to become the first person to escape Azkaban. How typical.*

*Thank the gods you're alive.*

The past couple hours had started to take on a surreal tinge, and one of his best friends in *Azkaban—Azkaban!*—was proving to be the final straw, as James finally felt the begins of a headache sprout, and was beginning to feel as if he had been hit with a strong Confundus Charm. Judging by the slightly dazed look on Lily's face, he wasn't alone on this one.

And apparently, Albus had picked up on this, rising from his seat.

"Lily, James. I do apologize, for the hour is late, and it seems that the day has taken its toll on us all. May I suggest you stay here until the morning? It wouldn't do to cause a panic with the dead walking, before you are reunited with your daughter. I can, of course, fill you in on everything else in the morning before taking you to Charlotte."

And it this, the last bit of fight drained out of the couple's frames.

"She's—she's really alright?" Lily asked, hopeful. The kindly Headmaster smiled, though it seemed mildly strained.

*Most likely fatigue,* James's mind inserted. If it was anything else, James simply lacked the mental capability to figure it out at that moment. Besides, they had most likely heard the worst of it. At least,
he couldn't imagine anything worse than Sirius in bloody Azkaban for twelve years.

"Right as rain, Lily. You'll be pleased to know she has decided to follow in her parent's footsteps in more ways than one. I will have Minerva fetch her after breakfast, and you can both see for yourselves then," The aged wizard remarked, as he escorted them up a flight of stairs behind an empty Phoenix perch to what appeared to be a rather stark guest room.

It would appear, James noted amusedly as Lily flopped down onto the bed, being Headmaster had its privileges.

Then, James processed what the other man had just said and whipped around.

Dumbledore smiled, and only gave him one last sentence before saying good night, and leaving him alone at the doorway. James leaned against the stone doorway for a minute, considering what he'd been told and let out a slightly maniacal laugh before closing the door and going to join his wife.

Like father, like daughter, it would seem. Gryffindor Seeker.

Well, it answered the question of Quidditch, James considered as he made his way for the bed, fatigue tugging ever more insistently at the edges of his consciousness.

James only paused to kick off his shoes before lying down behind Lily, who without a second thought turned around and clutched at the front of his shirt fiercely as he began to shake, at last each in the other's arms, and finally safe to let go without fear of judgement or danger.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: . . . Yeah, this is where I start to throw canon out the window while cackling maniacally.
"There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends. I have no notion of loving people by halves, it is not my nature."

-Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

Lily Potter woke up at the sound of the explosion.

Actually, it would be more accurate to say that she bolted awake, instinct dictating her actions as she scrambled for her wand. Lily then searched the room for the source of the noise as her husband fell out of the bed swearing, before springing up into a crouch on the carpeted floor, his training taking over as they looked for who or what had created the explosion in the darkness.

"Dobby is so sorry, miss! Dobby did not realize that Charlotte Potter was staying with the Headmaster too, miss, Dobby didn't mean to wake you up!"

. . . A House Elf?

A House Elf who thought she was her daughter?

It was far too early for this, she thought miserably.

Lily and James exchanged incredulous glances as they—somewhat sheepishly—stood up, and lit their wands with a quiet "Lumos!"

With the new sources of light, the surprised witch was able to observe what was now quite clearly a House Elf, though—if James's incredulous facial expression was anything to go by—he was a rather odd one. While they stared at the strangely clothed—how many hats and pairs of socks was he wearing?—Dobby the House Elf got a good look at the two of them as well, and his face contorted with confusion.

"You is not Charlotte Potter. You is too—red. But that . . . that means you is be her parents! It is an honor for Dobby to meet you both, for you must be just as great as Miss Charlotte, to have such a great and kind witch as her!"

Lily had to stifle a snicker, even as she became increasingly confused. *Just what had Charlotte been doing at Hogwarts?*

James, on the other hand, was unfazed, as he was only concerned with one thing right now and one thing only.
"That's exactly right, Dobby, both of us are great wizards, and right now, this great wizard wants something to eat. I don't suppose you could get something for the two of us?"

At this, Dobby brightened, clearly pleased to be given something to do.

"Professor Dumbledore is sent Dobby to bring breakfast," he excitedly explained. "He also says to remind you that Professor McGonagall is going to be bringing you to Miss Charlotte, sir, in his office later."

Lily couldn't help but feel a sense of trepidation at Dobby's last statement; the young mother doubted anyone could possibly have had this in mind when saying children grew up quickly. To her, it was quite literally just yesterday that her daughter was a baby, happily zooming around on the toy broomstick Sirius had gotten her and terrorizing the cat; today, she was a teenager—a Fourth Year, if she had her maths right.

In all honesty, she was a little afraid as to who McGonagall would be introducing them to. Would she be as bookish as Lily was at Hogwarts? Or, would she be as large a prankster as her father? Who were her friends? How was she Sorted?

Would she hate us?

Lily certainly wouldn't blame Charlotte if she did.

The rather enthusiastic—an understatement if there had ever been one—House Elf snapped his fingers to conjure up two comfy-looking chairs, along a table groaning under various breakfast foods, tearing Lily from her brooding. The heavenly scent of caffeine was good for that.

Dobby then left while Lily and James sat down and begun to inhale what was, essentially, their first meal in over a decade.

This day is already too weird to handle without coffee.

As she dug into her sausages with gusto, Lily mentally made a note to fix her and James's clothes after their meal into something slightly less formal and less dirt-stained. Wouldn't do to literally look like they had risen from the grave in their first meeting, she thought darkly.

Lily said as much aloud, and James laughingly agreed, before turning thoughtful.

"Dumbledore told me something last night. About Charlotte, that is."

"Dumbledore told us a lot of things last night about our daughter." Lily reminded him. And if the Headmaster thought she was going to let any of it go, he had another thought coming.

"Well, yes, but this was after, before we fell asleep," James grew more animated as he went on, looking as jittery as a First Year, gesticulating as he spoke, "He told me that Charlotte was Sorted into Gryffindor—"

Understandable, then. Neither of them would have cared if she had been Sorted anywhere else, but James had always possessed enough House pride to make the Founders jealous.

"—and she plays Seeker, Lily for the Quidditch team! Seeker."

Well. Better hide the vases, then. Wouldn't do to break a nice one this time.

The memory of the ugly gift from her sister stung a little, but it was easy to ignore as Lily laughed at
James's childlike excitement over Charlotte following in his footsteps—if in a different position, and hopefully with far less injuries.

They didn't talk about much, after that. James brought up her work with Flitwick, and Lily threw a few ideas at him about her final paper, while he poked holes in her arguments. He brought the subject of the missing Marauders' Map—either finally stolen by Filch in Seventh Year, or deliberately left behind for future pranksters, depending on who was telling the story—and Lily told him that it would serve him quite right if he, Sirius, and Remus never found it because someone else had gotten their hands on it. She had always loved poetic justice.

Eventually, Dobby the Quite Strange House Elf showed up and cleared away their plates joyfully, and the two of them set to dealing with their clothes. It was a simple enough process even all these years later, Lily was relieved to find, if a bit finicky for Muggle clothing.

No one had ever said the two of them weren't stubborn, however. Lily had just managed to create jeans and a rather nice blouse, if she did say so herself, when Dumbledore knocked on their door, and James let him in. As for her husband, he was a handsome sight in a blue button-down and khaki trousers, glasses long since fixed.

"Lily, James. May I enter?"

Both of them nodded, and the Headmaster entered. None of them said anything for a long, painfully silent minute as Dumbledore shifted uncomfortably while Lily watched, fascinated. She had never seen him anything approaching awkward before.

At last, James broke the silence. "Was there something you wanted, Albus?"

The creases in between Dumbledore's eyebrows deepened. "Not exactly for me, James. There was something I did not tell you, that I believe would be pertinent for you to be aware of before you meet with Charlotte today."

Lily and James glanced at each other curiously, but neither said anything as the headmaster continued.

"How much do you know about the Triwizard Tournament?"

Lily frowned. "Not that much. It was some sort of archaic competition between three magical schools, I think."

James shrugged, an innocent look on his face. "It was ended centuries ago because of the death toll, wasn't it?"

Professor Dumbledore nodded, a grim look in his eyes. "It was brought back this year, with Hogwarts as host, for overage students from Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, and Hogwarts to compete in."

"Right. . ." Lily said slowly. A terrible inkling was beginning to form in the back of her mind; but that couldn't possibly be right. "Bully for you, then. But what does that have to do with Charlotte? You told us the date is November first, nineteen ninety-four. She would have only be fourteen, nowhere near seventeen."

At this, the eccentric wizard gave her a piercing look, even as the feeling of dread refused to go away.

"There . . . there is no good way to put this," Dumbledore said finally. "Last night, the Goblet of
Fire, instead of deciding upon three Champions, was Confunded into giving out four names."

No. No.

"Their names, were Fleur Delacour, Viktor Krum, Cedric Diggory, and Charlotte Potter," the Headmaster continued, not unkindly. "I am terribly sorry."

Lily couldn't breathe, while James turned a peculiar shade of grey.

Charlotte had been entered into the Triwizard Tournament. The fucking Triwizard Tournament.

"I am terribly sorry," the Headmaster repeated remorsefully, and Lily could barely hear him above her blood roaring in her ears. "But there was nothing anyone could do until the deed had been done, and I assure you—"

Charlotte, her daughter, the laughing toddler Lily had watched zoom around on a toy broom barely two days ago, had been entered into a bloody death trap.

"—Myself, the Ministry, and Professor McGonagall will do all we can to guide her through the competition—"

And the man in front of her, professing remorse for Charlotte being in danger in a competition that killed fully trained wizards, was about to let it happen?

Charlotte had been entered into the Triwizard Tournament.

It was repeating, again and again in Lily's mind, a horrible, never-ending song: Charlotte had been entered into the Triwizard Tournament, Charlotte had been entered into the Triwizard Tournament. Her daughter had been entered into the Triwizard Tournament.

Lily felt her hands shake, and saw James clench his jaw as the windows shattered.

Charley Potter wasn't hiding. At all, thank you very much, Neville.

She was merely choosing to avoid the Great Hall today due to a sudden increase in her pariah status from all quarters—that, and she did actually have a sense of self-preservation.

No one sane in her position would go anywhere near a Hufflepuff today. Or possibly ever again.

The Fourth Year sighed as she leaned against the wall beside the stairs leading down to the common room and reflexively began to run her fingers through her chronically messy hair as she pondered the memories of last night. Christ, what had been up with Ron?

Roper, she wasn't surprised—she had been one of the first to condemn Charley second year for the Chamber, and they had never particularly liked each other, but Ron—

While not her closest friend, Ron had stood by her over the years, gaining a friendship made up of a bit more than mutual loyalty and Quidditch—he'd defeated the chess board in first year, and had actually managed to hex Crabbe into the infirmary Second Year after Hermione and Neville had been Petrified, she remembered, somewhere in her chest warming at the memory.

And, of course, there was always translating Oliver Wood-Speak into English. Tricky, that.

Even last year, when he and Hermione had been so awful to Luna originally on the train, he had still
been a good friend, covering for her and Hermione's rescue of Sirius when Dumbledore hadn't believed them about his innocence—

*Sirius*. Charley froze.

She had to write him, tell him what happened before he saw *The Daily Prophet*. She didn't want to have deal with her father's best friend, much less her godfather, believing her to be, as Snape had sneeringly put it last night, an "attention-seeking arrogant brat".

*It would be par for the course for the "problem child",* a voice that sounded suspiciously like Aunt Petunia whispered in the back of her mind. Charley told that voice to shut it.

But at the thought of the Dursleys, Charley forcibly snapped herself out of her pondering—it was *far* too early in the morning to be thinking about them—and mind made up, resolutely made her way down the stairs and through the common room, ignoring the smattering of applause from people who had already finished breakfast. Right outside the Fat Lady, though, she nearly ran over Hermione and Neville, the latter with a stack of napkin-wrapped toast in hand.


"W-we t-thought you might not want to face everyone yet . . . want to go for a walk?" Neville finished hopefully, offering her the toast.

"Good idea," Charley responded tersely, gingerly taking the toast, surprised at her friends' thoughtfulness. "Thank you."

Thank God for her friends; she sure as hell knew she didn't deserve them.

The trio quickly made their way downstairs and outside through the entrance hall, very deliberately not looking in on the currently raucous Great Hall as they made for the outdoors.

Soon, they were strolling by the Black Lake, admiring Durmstrang's magnificent ship. The morning was chilly, and the three of them strolled close together while munching on their toast.

Meanwhile, Charley explained what had happened after she'd left the Gryffindor table last night. Carefully, she told Hermione and Neville how Mr. Crouch had said she was caught in a magically binding contract, doing her best not to leave out the consequences if she refused to participate; namely, the loss of her magic, something that would probably kill an underage witch.

Additionally, she mentioned the Professors' disbelief—regardless of school—of her claims of innocence, and recounted the row with Sophie Roper to Neville. Hermione, meanwhile, scowled viciously the entire time at the mention of her.

"Never liked her anyway," Neville commented after she finished. Charley's head snapped to him, eyes wide behind her glasses.

Neville rarely committed to solid dislike of someone, or had ever confessed to a quick opinion—unless it involved Herbology, or Draco Malfoy. Even Cedric Diggory had commented on it last year, claiming Neville should have been in Hufflepuff for his reserve and impartiality.

"And of course we believe you," Hermione chimed in. "I mean, the look on your face when Dumbledore said your name!"

Neville nodded in agreement, adding, "I was worried you might hex Fred and George when you came back last night, too. I mean, what with the—party, and all."
"Honestly, I'm surprised people couldn't tell. You had no interest in competing, and I would think that reaction you had would have made things perfectly obvious to the Ministry," Hermione finished haughtily. "Someone else clearly put your name into the Goblet of Fire, and should be worrying about that."

"But the thing is, who did put my name in?" Charley questioned aloud, even as she savored the warm feeling from her friends' words. "Because I doubt whoever did has my best interests in mind, what with the contract and all."

"We'll figure it out, Charley," Neville reassured her. Nervously, he added, "I mean, we've g-got Hermione. She's like that b-bloke you were telling me about, Sh-shel-something—"

"Sherlock, Neville," Hermione corrected, smiling at the comparison to the famous fictional detective. "And he's right, Charley. There's only so many people who could—"

"Or would—" Charley interrupted.

"Or would enter your name," Hermione continued, unfazed, before becoming contemplative. "I mean, Moody's right, Charley, no student could have fooled the Goblet like that, or have gotten past Dumbledore's Age Line. With them out, that just leaves the teachers."

"Unless someone disguised themselves as a student or maybe Mr. Crouch, but that'd be too big of a risk . . ." Charley trailed off thoughtfully.

Hermione nodded, her eyes far away as she contemplated the possibilities. "All of the Seventh Years and foreign students were watching each other like hawks the entire time, Mister Crouch is working too closely with Dumbledore for an impostor, and that's who would have to be impersonated otherwise; I imagine someone would have noticed him or a student in two different places."

The three of them walked in silence for some time, each brooding over the grim possibilities and their implications. Anyone underage was out, if Hermione's logic was correct, so that most likely ruled any pranks. Charley was relatively sure that she had never made any overage Seventh Years angry; at least, none that could have crossed Dumbledore's Age Line.

Which, she realized with a sickeningly familiar sense of dread, left the teachers, and any Ministry officials who weren't Mister Crouch (Or Percy Weasley; no one could pretend to be that boring). And, of course, there was just about anyone else from Durmstrang or Beauxbatons, along with intruders.

Charley was really glad they had a good Defense teacher this year.

"If it helps any, Hermione, I don't think it's the Defense teacher trying to kill me again," Charley said dryly, breaking the silence as the other two burst into knowing laughter.

"To be fair, Charley, Lockhart only tried to Obliviate you and Ron," Neville corrected, as they enjoyed the lighter moment amidst the gloom in the misty morning. The bespectacled girl among them, however, soon turned solemn once more as she stopped and turned to Neville.

"Speaking of Ron," Charley began slowly. "Has he come around?"

Neville hesitated as he fell silent, and Hermione similarly dithered when Charley looked at her.

"Well?" she bit out.

"Erm . . . you see, Charley, he was at breakfast," Hermione finally offered. "We did talk to him.
Charley tilted her head back and closed her eyes in exasperation. "Does he really still think I entered myself?"

The other two Fourth years looked at each other, giving unreadable looks.

"He . . . not r-really, Charley," Neville quietly said at last. "To t-tell you the truth, he seemed . . . a bit —jealous."

"Jealous? Of what? That someone's trying to kill me again?" Charley exclaimed, infuriated. "That people now have yet another reason to stare at me and make life difficult?"

"Look, Charley, don't get mad at us, it's just that, it's always you who gets the lion's share of the attention," Hermione began, quickly adding when Charley opened her mouth, "I know it's not your fault, and everyone and their mother knows you'd be happier without it, and no one wants someone after them, but, well . . . "

"But. Well. What?" Charley demanded, furious. Hermione sighed again frustratedly as she helplessly looked to Neville.

"You know Ron's got all of his brothers at home, and he's always competing against them, and you're his famous friend who always takes the limelight away—I know, you don't want it," she added hurriedly. "Usually, he's able to get over it, but I think this time was just too much for him and it doesn't justify his behavior at all, but I think he's just so angry and jealous right now he just can't see past the end of his nose right now."

"Though I doubt Luna asking about his 'Nargle colony' was doing this morning helped much," Neville commented drily. Charley choked, and almost laughed at the image of the blonde Ravenclaw asking Ron Weasley of all people about one of her semi-imaginary creatures.

"We did try," Hermione offered, her face still grave. "Ron just . . . can't deal. It doesn't help you two weren't that close before."

"Great," Charley said bitterly, shaking her head. "Just great. So one of the few friends I thought would believe me can't get over himself. Noted. Now what?"

"Write to Sirius," Neville interjected. The two girls stared at him. "I-I mean, he is y-your Godfather, right? He'd want to know. H-he did tell you to keep him posted, it's like he expected this—"

"Neville, you're brilliant!" Hermione declared, at which Neville turned red as a tomato while Charley sniggered.

"Why didn't I think of that before? Come on, Charley," she threw over her shoulder, as she took off for the Owlery, Neville already hot on her heels.

Charley shook her head with a rueful grin, and crammed the last bit of toast in her mouth before taking off after them.

The Gryffindor trio arrived at the Owlery red-faced and panting as they ran up the outside stairs.

Hermione flung the door open as they entered, only to find inside one Cedric Diggory, with an Eagle Owl on his arm and a fat-looking letter in hand.

_Bugger._
All four students stared at each other for a long minute, before Diggory shrugged, gave Charley a tight smile, and went back to wrangling a rather recalcitrant-looking owl. Charley eventually awkwardly entered the Owlery first, deliberately not looking at Cedric while she, Neville, and Hermione skirted around the bewildered Hufflepuff.

*What do we do now? It's not like we could discuss Sirius with him in earshot.*

But, Hermione took charge in the end, reaching up for a school owl while hissing at Neville to get a quill, ink, and parchment, her cheeks flushing as she glanced furtively at Cedric. Charley then began to write, while Hermione proceeded to inspect some of the school owls and Neville kept watch; in the letter, Charley was careful to gloss over her House's reactions to her name being spit out by the Goblet, as well as her dreams from last night about Wormtail and Voldemort.

*No need to worry him,* Charley mused to herself as she finished. He had already come back to the country because of some scar pains she'd had once. If she told him about her dreams, he'd probably break into Hogwarts again.

Charley still dreamed, sometimes, that it hadn't worked. That her and Hermione's madcap plan to save her godfather hadn't worked, one way or another. That Professor Lupin had been slightly more cunning as a wolf, or Wormtail had, instead of running, chosen to commit murder.

That Sirius had been Kissed while Charley watched.

She, Hermione, and Sirius had been incredibly lucky. *Charley* had been incredibly lucky; she didn't want to think about a world lacking Sirius Black and his casual offers to turn Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia into pig-nosed rats at the end of every letter.

"Hey, Potter!" Charley jumped, almost spilling ink over her finished letter before hastily folding it up behind her back and turning to face the other Champion.

"What is it, Cedric?" she asked cautiously. Strangely enough, the Hufflepuff looked almost sheepish at her question.

"Listen, Potter, is it okay if I talk to you—in private?" At this, he glanced at a suspicious Neville at her shoulder and—was Hermione *blushing*?

After a moment, Charley curtly nodded and let herself be led outside while glancing over her shoulder at Neville, who gave her a familiar reassuring look. Charley nodded, more to herself than to him, or a businesslike Hermione.

Once outside, she turned to face Cedric.

"Potter—Charlotte."

"Call me Charley," she corrected brusquely, flinching slightly at her full name.

At this, Cedric Diggory winced sheepishly. "Sorry, I forgot 'bout that."

Charley sighed. It wasn't the first time it had happened, would never be the last, and it was rather stupid, really, she should just get over it already. It'd been years since Aunt Petunia had...

*Too early for that, Potter.*

Charley huffed. "What do you want, Cedric?"
"Well, I. I didn't get a chance to say so last night, but—I believe you."

Charley blinked, stupefied. "Wa—What?"

There was no way she had heard him correctly. *Even after last year—no bloody way.*

"I believe you," Cedric said determinedly, before going on, "Everyone was talking about it last night and this morning—and, well. You're alright, Charley. It's pretty clear that you didn't enter your name. Kenneth Towler—you know him? Sixth Year Ravenclaw?—kept going on about how shocked you had looked, and how angry the Headmaster was that I—well. I'm sorry you got caught up in all of this."

Charley was frozen with. Even after the Dementor attack last year, when he and Cho Chang had helped her get comfortable flying again, she'd never have expected anything. Cedric was a Sixth Year, a Prefect, and Hufflepuff to boot; combine that with the fact that he was a legitimate Champion, and that the school widely considered her a lunatic whore for attention, and Charley just considered it a miracle she hadn't gotten hexed by someone yet.

And Cedric, the one with the most right to hate her, believed *Charley?*

"Tha. . . Thanks, Cedric," Charley finally managed. As her brain finally caught up with everything, she also added wryly, "I-I'm sorry for stealing your moment of glory."

"Anyone who thinks that you'd want glory for anything other than winning the Quidditch Cup don't know you at all, Potter," Cedric said laughingly.

But Charley didn't giggle along, his joke accidentally hitting a sore scar of hers.

"I wonder, sometimes," she whispered, looking down at her feet briefly, before looking back up at the Hufflepuff Prefect, her glasses sliding back on her nose.

"Charley," Cedric said his grey eyes open, somber, and sincere. "If I can do anything to help, just ask."

"Isn't that against the rules?" Charley said archly.

"Isn't having a fourteen-year-old in the Tournament against the rules?" Cedric asked her challengingly. "Potter. I'm not offering to help you win—but I will help you not get hurt."

Charley studied him suspiciously, looking for the catch. "But, we'll still compete during the tasks fairly, you trying to win as hard as you can, and me doing the same?"

Cedric gave her a wide smile as he nodded easily. "Just like old times. May the best Seeker win, Potter."

Charley snickered. "In that case, Viktor Krum's got this."

Charley turned to re-enter the Owlery, but before she could Cedric left one last, rather odd, parting shot.

"Um, Potter?"

"What?"

"One more thing—Hermione Granger. Could you. . ."
"Could I what?" she said suspiciously.

Cedric shifted his weight from foot to foot, refusing to meet her eyes. "Could...could you tell her I'll be pulling for you two and Longbottom? Please?"

"Sure," Charley said slowly. And at that, Cedric Diggory turned around and made what looked not too dissimilar from a hasty retreat.

Charley watched the back of Cedric, trying to parse out the exact significance of his request, before eventually shrugging in defeat. Hermione and Neville would have a better chance of it, she decided. Complicated emotional things had never been her strong point.

"What did he want?" Hermione inquired—rather breathlessly, Charley thought as she shook her head before raking her fingers through her hair, as the full implications of her conversation with the Hogwarts Champion hit her. Well. Except for the last odd bit.

"He believed me, Hermione," Charlotte said, shaking her head disbelievingly. He believed me!

Once the letter to Sirius was given one last edit and sent off, Charley, Hermione, and Neville grimly began to make their way back to the castle, the brief celebration fading quickly as they braced themselves for the day ahead, Slytherins, Hufflepuffs, and all. But, after the unexpected conversation with Cedric, Charley couldn't help but feel a surge of fragile hope that maybe it wouldn't be quite that bad—or at least not worse than Second Year.

As they made for the staircase that would bring them to the library, they quietly began to discuss the plan for preparation—mostly extra studying for history, much to Charley's dismay, with Hermione favoring the history of the First Task first, along with commonly used obstacles in the past to test "daring and nerve" of Champions.

Charley didn't notice how everyone else in the Entrance Hall had fallen silence until Neville, turning his head to answer a question from Hermione, turned pale and yanked Charley and Hermione to the ground as two red streaks of light flew over their heads.

As Hermione created a shield with a quick muttered spell, Charley grabbed Neville's hand and moved to hide behind the staircase, while most bystanders ran to the Great Hall from the unexpected firefight.

The remaining witnesses—Durmstrang students, mostly—took cover in the alcoves as Charley fired off a Disarming Spell, then a Dancing Feet Spell in the direction of their two attackers. Hermione ran to join them, looking over her shoulder when a blue bolt hit her face and sent her sprawling with a cry.

In response, Neville gave a furious yell of "Furnunculus!" at the source of the jinx—Zacharias Smith, Charley noted darkly. Little git.

Zacharias Smith with the help of Megan Jones, Charley mentally amended, ducking another Jelly-Legs Jinx and firing another jinx off in return while she ran to Hermione's aid; the buck-toothed girl clutched her mouth as Charley helped her up when she looked up and saw across the hall to both her horror and relief—

"IMMOBULUS!"

Charley and Hermione, along with everyone else in the hall, were frozen into place. Hermione, Charley saw out of the corner of her eye, appeared to still have her teeth growing out of her mouth.
"Forty points from Hufflepuff each—twenty points each from Gryffindor—never have I seen—shame on each one of you—" Professor Sinistra was nearly indecipherable with rage at the now-frozen Fourth Years.

She strode to the center of the entrance hall before demanding, "Can I trust you to behave like civilized beings if I reverse the spell?"

Silence reigned as she gave each of them a truly terrifying look; apparently satisfied, she lifted the spell.

Smugly, Charley watched as Jones nullified her handiwork on Smith before stepping forward reluctantly, pasting an innocent look on her face, to quickly plead, "Professor, can I take Hermione to the infirmary? She was hit in the face with some kind of jinx."

Hermione could only nod desperately, hands no longer capable of hiding her growing front teeth.

The Astronomy Professor softened minutely with sympathy, and nodded in acquiescence before adding sternly, "Don't think this will get either of you out of detention, Miss Potter, Miss Granger. I expect to see you, Miss Potter, in the Headmaster's office immediately after escorting Miss Granger to Madam Pomfrey; the password is Cockroach Cluster. Miss Granger, come see me afterwards for your punishment. *Finite Incantatem.*"

This was directed towards Hermione, nullifying the jinx. Before anything else could happen, the two girls quickly strode out of the hall and towards the hospital wing, past a pair of mutinous-looking Hufflepuffs—at least, until Professor Sinistra turned towards them and Neville with a rather vengeful air.

"As for you three, the Headmaster will be deciding your fates. Dueling in the halls indeed..."

Charley could have sworn she heard Zacharias Smith whimper.

But, fifteen minutes and one trip to the hospital wing later, Charley was standing in front of the gargoyle guarding the Headmaster's office and seriously debating her life choices; she was starting to wonder if it was possible to set a record for getting sent to Dumbledore's office in one week—except for Fred and George, of course. Charley doubted anyone could out do them.

She snickered at the thought of the twins, but it quickly faded to nothing as a Ravenclaw Firstie walked by, shooting her a curious look.

Right. Charley squared her shoulders. *Come on, are you a bloody Gryffindor or not, Potter?*

Finally, she managed to spit out the password, and proceeded to nervously make her way up the stairwell.

As she entered the Headmaster's office, she shot a quick glance at Neville, Zacharias Smith, and Megan Jones as a measure for what she was in store for. Presently, all three looked appropriately cowed under Professor Sinistra's glare; in contrast, the Headmaster seemed almost jovial when he saw her, his piercing blue eyes far warmer than last night, when he had been interrogating her on whether she had put her name into the goblet.

"Ah, Miss Potter, thank you for joining us. As I was just explaining to Mister Longbottom, Mister Smith, and Miss Jones here, I have decided that due to the fact you, young Neville, and Miss Granger were provoked, you would have no need to serve detention; however, the point deductions will still stand."
Charley opened her mouth to protest—it had been self-defense, Smith and Jones had started it, Hermione was in the hospital wing for crying out loud—when Neville caught her eye and shook his head.

Reluctantly, she snapped her mouth shut, and decided to ask him for details later. As she turned her attention back to Dumbledore, the Professor tilted his head downward as his eyes seemed to x-ray her, an unreadable expression passing over his face. As she met his gaze, the Gryffindor set her jaw, determined to neither give in nor be found wanting.

After a minute, he seemed to make a decision, and dismissed everyone except for Charley. She cautiously sat down in a chair while he retrieved Professor McGonagall, for "a change in plan".

What was all that about?

As she sat and waited nervously, Charley couldn't help but absentmindedly listen to comforting cooing of Fawkes as her mind wandered. Mostly, her thoughts seemed to be stuck on the memory of Hermione falling to the ground.

She was jerked out of her brooding suddenly, and it took a couple seconds before she realized it was Fawkes, who had raised his tone to a piercing one, and now gave her a knowing stare before resuming his calming song.

Charley returned to her thoughts, but this time, they were stuck on Death on the Nile. She had just finished reading about the odd interview Poirot had with the maid Louise—definitely code of some sort, Charley had seen it before, she was hiding something; personally, she was still convinced Jacqueline had killed Linnet, but was starting wonder if she had an accomplice to help her do it.

But before she could think on it any further, Professor Dumbledore walked back in with Professor McGonagall in tow, her eyes blazing and cheeks red.

Dumbledore, on the other hand, seemed almost grave, but with a strange light in his eyes, almost of anticipation, if she had to put a word to it. He sat across from her, while her Head of House walked over to stand behind the Fourth Year, her hand dropping to rest on Charley's shoulder.

Professor Dumbledore leaned forward, intertwining his fingers as he began to speak softly and gently, as if she were a wild animal. Unconsciously, she straightened in her seat, and met the Headmaster's gaze head-on, even as her scar prickled.

"Miss Potter, I am afraid a delicate matter has come up; it involves your parents."

Not the tournament?

Charley's brow furrowed. "My parents have been dead for thirteen years, Professor. What do they have to do with anything?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: For the record, I'm a nerd, and headcanon Harry as a mystery novel fan.
"Miracles, do not, in fact, break the laws of nature."

-C.S. Lewis

Charley couldn't think, didn't dare to feel.

Not when she was hallucinating.

Because that was the only possible explanation when she was seeing her parents in the Headmaster's office.

Her dead parents.

James and Lily Potter.

Standing there, in front of her, and very clearly not dead.

They didn't look any older than they had in pictures, Charley realized as she clapped her slightly-shaking hands over her mouth. Lily's hair was a bit longer, and James's frames were different, but the resemblance to photos—to her—was there, and it was disturbing.

People hadn't been joking when they said she had her father's hair and her mother's eyes. But that wasn't something Charley could figure out by looking at her parents, because they couldn't be there. James Potter and Lily Evans had died thirteen years ago, at the hands of Voldemort.

They were dead.

Charley had seen and done some mad things, but nothing like this. Nothing could have been like this.

Why now; why them?

"Charlotte?"

The person who could not possibly be Lily Potter spoke her full name in a low, kind-sounding voice, and Charley flinched.

The only thing keeping her from running out of Dumbledore's office was McGonagall's tight grip on her shoulder, as every instinct worth a damn Charley had ever gained screamed at her to run far, far away from whatever this was, if not a hallucination.
If this was a hallucination, or some stress-induced dream, her mother would have known to call her Charley, and not something that was the same as *freak*. Whoever they were, they were real. Tangible.

Charley gave a huff of choked laughter that ended as a wet sob, and clapped her hands over her mouth as she tried to breathe and think at the same time. It was proving a little difficult, but she eventually managed some sort of success, as Charley's mind whirled, and she tried to shove the hurricane of grief and anger and stupefaction in a little box in the back of her mind, never to be examined.

She wasn't sure she would survive the pain.

If they were there, and she wasn't dreaming, then there was a reason behind the two people in front of her—and after three years of battling dark wizards and giant snakes and Dementors, Charley knew there was *always* a reason, sometimes even three—and it seemed to be up to her again to take care of it.

*Could a person use Polyjuice for someone who's already dead?*

Charley didn't know why she was still surprised—or why her chest hurt so much as she tried to turn her best cool glare on her not-parents.

They just *couldn't* be. For Charley's sanity, if nothing else.

"What—What do you want?" Charley finally choked out, as she quickly rubbed away any sign of unwanted tears on her face, heedless of her slipping glasses.

The James Potter doppelgänger in front of her frowned at Charley's question. "You know, I'm not entirely sure. Maybe a shower?"

Lily Potter's lookalike jabbed him in the side and hissed, "James!"

"My daughter out of the Triwizard Tournament," he continued. This was accompanied with a dirty look at Dumbledore, who suddenly looked rather forlorn. Professor McGonagall's hand dug into Charley's shoulder, nearly to the point of pain.

Charley blinked once. Twice.

That wasn't how this worked. Dark wizards—well, mostly Voldemort, but Pettigrew and Macnair and those Death Eaters at the Quidditch World Cup as well—were many things, but lying like this wasn't one of them. Not so *badly*. It was always the *normal* lie, the one you want to believe, but—

But if they weren't there trying to do something, if they weren't Polyjuiced to looked then that meant they were—

*Oh, God, I—*

They were—

*Merlin, this means that—*

They *were—*

*Oh.*

"Oh," Charley whispered, her voice wrecked, and sounding like she had been screaming as she
greedily stared at her parents, Lily and James Potter. "You're real."

The crush of emotions returned.

Charley’s heart was being crushed and being reassembled out of the shards. Or maybe it was all just in her head.

The urge to run felt like it had never existed in the first place.

Charley opened her mouth, meaning to say something, anything, but nothing came up except an embarrassing small whimper. Lily—her mother gave her a wavering smile, and Charley closed her mouth. She sniffed loudly as James crouched down in front of her, his face friendly and open.

"As real as you are, Prongslet. As real as you are."

Charley looked helplessly to Dumbledore, who gave her a gentle smile. "My dear girl, I am happy to say that the two people you see are exactly whom you believe them to be."

She then glanced at Professor McGonagall, who only squeezed her shoulder before the bewildered Gryffindor looked back at the Headmaster.

"We checked."

At these last words from the bearded Professor, the incredulous teenager looked back to James and Lily Potter with a renewed sense of stupefaction, and began to think.

Charley nodded, slowly took in one deep breath after another, reminded herself that breaking down in front of her teachers and apparently not dead parents was a bad idea, specifically after really meeting them for the first time. First impressions. Right.

But they were alive.

It was a heady, terrifying thought, and Charley loved it and hated it all at once as she hoped beyond pathetic hope it would never leave. But, then the obvious question remained, before she could just let herself fall, just to give herself that safety net.

She had to know.

Charley looked at at her parents, and choked another question out past her lips.

"How?"

That was the question, James had to admit; much like Lily, Charlotte certainly didn't waste any time getting to the heart of the matter.

"At the moment—we don't know." Lily was frank with her, and James could only agree. Any possibilities violated the laws of magic, and even Dumbledore had only been able to shake his head in wonder.

"Do you know if it's... permanent?"

"Quite permanent, according to Madam Pomfrey's scans," Dumbledore reassured her, his tone sympathetic. "By all appearances, it is as if they never died. We will, of course, keep an eye on your parents, make sure there are no changes."
James rather suspected Dumbledore had grown fond of his daughter.

Judging by the familiar look—Merlin, she looked like his mother right now with that face—Charlotte was drawing similar conclusions from the Headmaster’s statement, nodding her head before beginning to break out into somewhat teary, hysterical laughter.

James and Lily looked at each other with alarm, while Professor McGonagall conjured a white handkerchief with her wand, offering it to her student. ”Miss Potter?”

”I—I’m sorry . . . it’s j-just . . . God—” Charlotte paused, taking in several wet, choked-up breaths before taking the conjured handkerchief. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks, and James wished fiercely for when all her troubles were small things, toddler’s woes that could be fixed by a whispered joke and hug.

James felt his heart break a little more, and set that particular bit of rage aside for the day that he would avenge every hurt his family had ever suffered.

At the tears on their daughter’s face, Lily took several steps forward, crouching down before her, James staying at her back, watching his family carefully, helplessly, trying to figure out something that could help Charlotte.

Merlin, he hated to see Charlotte cry, loathed it nearly as much as Voldemort.

As the cause of it, James thought darkly, the bastard earned the top spot. Barely.

Meanwhile, Lily was trying desperately to guide this strange dynamic between them and Charlotte. ”Charlotte—sweetheart, I know that—”

”Charley,” she offered softly, interrupting Lily.

”What?”

”I prefer to be called Charley.” A familiar challenging gleam entered her eyes, shining with tears. After a moment, Lily met matching green eyes and nodded firmly, along with James.

”Okay,” he said quietly.

A small, bitter smile curved his daughter’s lips at this, and James knew, just knew that Petunia and Dursley had something to do with it. Merlin, when he got his hands on them . . .

Before, he’d only ever seen that expression on some of the faces of Lily’s battlefield patients: the ones who believed they were beyond saving.

Fortunately, all three of the Potters were disturbed from the brooding stalemate they had fallen into when Dumbledore breached the thick silence, causing all three of them to jump.

”Perhaps it would be for the best if Professor McGonagall and I retired from my office for a while?” he asked, not unkindly.

Without a second thought, James accepted ruefully. ”It’d probably be for the best, Professor. Merlin knows it’s been some time, to say the least.”

Lily hummed in agreement, before looking at Charley for her opinion.
His daughter only threw James an unreadable look from behind her familiar frames before nodding once, mutely.

Dumbledore and McGonagall exited, and James heard their steps echo down the stairs, quickly turning into silence.

Lily Potter had hardly any idea on where to begin, particularly in the tense silence left by thirteen years.

Charley had looked like someone backed into a corner from the second she and James had walked in, and the look had barely begun to fade; Lily herself barely had any idea on how to, other than trying to talk.

It was something that Lily knew only too well the power of; talking too much about some things and not at all about others had provided a messy end to her friendship with him, to say nothing of her sister, or James. Talking about the right things after years of talking about nothing that mattered had allowed a vaguely antagonistic friendship to grow into a marriage and love Lily considered herself all too lucky to have.

So, Lily suspected, it would be talking, if nothing else, that would let them and try and fix this.

"Where do you want to begin?" she asked. Charley remained silent for long minute. But just as Lily began to worry she had accidentally hit upon an emotional scar, her daughter spoke, quiet but sure.

"Well, I'm in Gryffindor, for a start," Charley ventured, her eyes darting back and forth between James and Lily as she absently wrung her hands, colors slowly returning to her pale knuckles, Lily noted, relieved.

James immediately gave Charley a warm, proud grin. "So we were told—Dumbledore said that you played Quidditch?"

She gave a fragile smile, responding to the attention like a flower to the sun. "Yeah, I made Seeker First Year."

"First Year? How'd you get a broom around Minnie?" James exclaimed, his grin turning conspiratorial.

"She actually bought me one—a Nimbus Two Thousand."

"First Year? How'd you get a broom around Minnie?" James exclaimed, his grin turning conspiratorial.

As Lily savored the pride she felt for her daughter—and quickly quashed the worry at a First Year playing Quidditch—she couldn't help but wonder: how did a First Year convince the famously stern Head of Gryffindor House to so blatantly break the rules? And one that had specifically been put in place for the safety of the students she so fiercely looked after?

Charley only gave her a far too familiar response. "Long story."

Thankfully, James didn't let it go, slowly coaxing their daughter out from behind her shields to tell what was most likely a heavily redacted version of the story, if Lily remembered Hogwarts and being a teenager at all.

"You see," Charley began, her eyes gleaming with something suspiciously like pride, "It started when we—my year—had our first flying lesson. It was with another house—"
"Lily-flower! Don't interrupt Charley-girl here; it's her first story for her old man," James mock-scolded, exuding childish excitement, even while his grave hazel eyes told a very different story.

*She's already on edge and ready to jinx someone into next week. Let her talk.*

Sometimes, she forgot how abnormally good he was reading people. It was one of the reasons why Mad-Eye had wanted him for the Aurors right out of Hogwarts in the first place, Lily remembered.

"Anyway, Charley-girl, where were you?" James said, carefully retaining, for the most part, very real, aura of carefree excitement while Charlotte gave an indecipherable look to James at the unprompted nickname before continuing.

"Well, it started off simple enough. Madam Hooch was teaching us how to mount our brooms and we were about to take off for the first time when a friend of mine, Neville—"

Oh, *she must be talking about Frank and Alice's boy.* Lily felt another wave of grief wash over her, still biting after a second conversation with Dumbledore this morning. Eventually, after she and James had calmed down, and they had talked with the Headmaster, gaining a very brief overview of what had apparently been a very long thirteen years. Lily hadn't liked most of it, but they had talked, and it proved informative.

She had cried for what had felt like hours at the news of Frank and Alice, and she still felt a prick of grief at the thought of her friends suffering like that at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange.

But, Lily couldn't help but be happy be grateful for the small mercy of Charlotte finding a friend in Neville Longbottom, and he in her.

"—turned out he had broken his wrist!" Said daughter had now opened up quite a bit, beginning to gesticulate to an enraptured James, who now winced.

"Not exactly a good introduction to flying, I bet."

"No kidding. Neville still doesn't like flying. Anyway, Hooch then took him to the hospital wing, and told us that if she saw any of us flying, she'd have us expelled."

Leaving Gryffindor and Slytherin Firsties alone with broomsticks, Lily thought incredulously. Was she hoping for an excuse to hand out detentions?

"After she left, things got interesting."

"How interesting." The interruption this time came from Lily, who was getting an inkling of just how interesting things had gotten. At this, Charlotte's face took on a shiftier look.

"Charlotte, you didn't. . ."

Charlotte scowled in response. *Charley, and Malfoy started it, Mum—*

She froze, and gave Lily a slightly panicked look. The older witch did her best to project calm to her daughter, wishing she could do something to help her through the Freudian slip. At least, she hoped it was.

"I—I can call you Mum, right? And you, well. . .Dad?" Charley asked, her voice cracking on the last word.
"Hmmmm. . .I suppose if you're unsure that we really are your parents, I can always do a Paternity Charm—though, admittedly, the hair is a bit of a giveaway, if I do say so myself," James commented lightly, moving to crouch in front of Charlotte alongside Lily before sobering, exchanging a quick glance with the redhead.

"Charlotte." James said quietly.

"Charlotte."

Oddly enough, Charley couldn't find it in herself to object to the use of her full name. It was like when Professor Dumbledore used it in conversation; her father said it like he. . .cared. Like it meant something, and wasn't a synonym for "freak".

Maybe she could learn to live like that.

Where a name wasn't a shield from the world, not a way to prevent from getting stabbed where she was soft and vulnerable.

Where the icy statement of "No one has, or will ever, be to able to love a freak like you," never permeated her dreams.

She turned her attention back to her parents—she doubted she'd ever get used to that, the shock of it, the thrill at it; she had parents—ingrained self-preservation and stubborn hope warring within her.

"I know that we were out of the picture for over a decade," her father began. "And nothing that anything your mother or I say or do can make up for it. Nowhere near it, and for that, I am incredibly sorry, but what you've had to go through."

Charley hardly dared to breathe; faced with her wildest fantasies as a child in front of her, she was paralyzed with the primal fear it would all disappear like a mirage in the desert.

"But—sweetheart. Look at me, please." Lily implored, tilting the young Gryffindor's chin up with a gentle hand, to meet startlingly identical emerald eyes.

"Whatever happens—whatever has happened—it doesn't matter. You are our daughter, and we love you very much. Like your father said, we weren't able to be there for you before, and I am so, so, sorry for that, Charlotte."

She wouldn't look away. No matter how much her eyes stung like that.

"But will you allow us be here now?"

Shit.

Charley really didn't know what to say to that. To any of that.

To the promise of a family, to the possibility of gaining that unconditional love, and not the brief lie she had possessed, created by Aunt Petunia.

_The lie that, when destroyed, had destroyed perfect charity-case niece Charlotte Potter, and left me, "problem child" orphan Charley Potter in her place_, Charley bitterly remembered.

Or perhaps not. Bitterly, that was.

It had been a crushing blow, to say the least, for her eight-year-old self, to have the only family—or
so she had believed to be family; Hermione and Neville had always called them relatives, with plenty of distaste—tell her like it was, had been: that no one loved her, or ever would after she had tried so hard to fit, and it just hadn't worked—

But that was beside the point. The point, really, was that for some reason, by some stroke of luck, she had been presented with the chance of Charlotte Potter being loved.

And Charley let herself fall.

She reached out recklessly, and flung her arms around her parents for the first time in thirteen years; as hot tears streamed down her cheeks and fogged up her glasses, Charlotte Potter smiled.

You know, maybe Luna was onto something about hugging.

Really does make things seem a bit less horrible.

Of course, nothing was ever quite that simple, Lily thought with a sigh.

Eventually, an age later, they had to disentangle, and face the world outside the small room containing them and the soft crooning of a phoenix. Oddly—or perhaps not at all—Lily felt a sense of loss as Charley moved away, the frames of her glasses no longer digging into Lily’s shoulder.

As Charlotte moved to leave to find the Headmaster, James called out as one remark made earlier finally processed with him.

"Wait a minute. You said Malfoy? As in Lucius Malfoy's son?"

"Is there another git named Malfoy wandering around that tries to hex me?" was their daughter's acerbic reply.

"Great taste in enemies, kid."

"James!"

"What? It's true, Lils. I lost track of how many times he tried to kill Sirius in the war... Something about being a disgrace to his wife's family or some rot—"

"Potter." The warning was growled this time, as Charlotte giggled helplessly at his antics before elaborating on the incident.

"Yeah, Malfoy tried to steal a Remembrall from Neville's things and took off on a broom. I, uh—got it back. Professor McGonagall saw the whole thing and instead of expelling me, decided to put me on the Quidditch team."

James beamed at his daughter, while Lily felt her blood pressure rise at yet another reckless act from years past, while Charlotte reluctantly stepped backwards towards the door, ducking her head as James crowed, "Way to go, Prongslet! Holding up the family tradition, I see."

Strangely, Charlotte gave her father a familiar crooked grin at this compliment; but it was the inherent mischief to be found in it that made Lily want to groan. She had seen that look in James and Sirius far too often.

"Don't you mean the Marauder tradition—Prongs?" Charley said with a puckish gleam in her eyes.
Well.

That answered one question, at least. Lily hadn't seen that one coming. Nor had James, judging by the gobsmacked look on his face before he burst out into delighted laughter.

Charlotte was nearly out the door when she stopped again, and turned back around with a perplexed look on her face, her nose wrinkled just like it when she was an unimpressed toddler.

"Wait, what exactly is a Prongslet? It sounds like a name for a hamster."

This time, it was Lily who howled with unbridled laughter as James gave her and Charley an offended look.

Eventually, Charlotte left in search of the two professors, and Lily and James collected themselves as they waited in the Headmaster's office.

Lily leaned back in her chair with a groan as aches and bruises made themselves known. James sighed, taking his glasses off and rubbing his eyes, drained after the morning conversation—debriefing, really—and reunion, clearly bracing himself for something before opening his mouth.

"I think she should stay in Hogwarts right now."

He couldn't be serious.

"Bullshit."

"Lily, please, I—" James began, but Lily refused to be stopped on this topic. Not now, not after she'd gotten the barest idea of just how Petunia and Vernon had been taking care of Charlotte all these years.

"Bull. Shit. James, Charlotte has just been informed that her parents are alive, and there is a damn good reason she acted like that, and that reason is my brother-in-law." James raised his eyebrows at this.

"I rather suspect your sister had something to do with it as well." Lily snorted in disbelief. For all of her sister's failings, and there were many, she, by herself, never would have let it escalate to the point by she would never have treated her own blood like that. Vernon Dursley was the entire catalyst for it there.

She leaned towards James. "I know neither of us got along with her before, but Petunia wouldn't stoop to that level with her own niece, of all people, by herself."

Lily took a deep breath, attempting to calm down. They were getting off-topic from the real point of this conversation.

"James, our daughter just had a metaphorical bomb dropped on her," Lily reminded him in a measured tone "She, more than anyone else, deserves the time to know us, away from the interference that Hogwarts would create, particularly with the Tournament."

That little surprise had not gone over well, to say the least. The Headmaster had made a good decision in telling them earlier. Lily didn't want to think about what would have happened had they been forced to find out elsewhere.

Their reactions had been. . .interesting, she supposed. Well, her—ridiculous, overprotective,
wonderful—husband's had been. She'd never seen someone make a window explode like that before.

Though, she supposed, she hadn't been much better. She doubted Dumbledore's beard would ever be quite the same after her little fireworks display.

"Both of us, as well as any tutor, can manage her education, James, and she can visit her friends during schools breaks and at Hogsmeade. I want to give her a family, darling, as best as I can after the Tri-Wizard fiasco. God knows she deserves it, and she needs the space."

Her feeling of victory at James's torn expression soon fell away, when his stubbornness re-appeared as he clasped her hands fiercely, as if he were willing her to see his side in this.

"I know where you're coming from, I really do, love, and believe me, I'd love to get her out of this if I could. But I can't, it just wouldn't be feasible."

Lily opened her mouth to protest before James beat her to the punch again.

"Let me finish, please. Our cottage at Godric's Hollow is destroyed, and I doubt either of us want to go back there," Lily had to suppress a shudder at this. That place held too many bad memories, after their last Halloween.

"Potter Manor has been abandoned for nearly two decades by wizards," James continued, "And the wards have probably gone to shit and will take ages to restore, what with Father being the last one to touch them let alone fix them; and what with Voldemort on the move again, it wouldn't be safe; the two of us will be sitting ducks as it is. I'd never forgive myself—and neither would you—if the Prongslet got hurt."

Lily was silent at this. James, if she were honest, did have a good point. They were two adults and veterans of the war and more than capable of handling themselves, but Charlotte, a half-trained, inexperienced student, would be unprotected at best and a liability at worst, as much as she hated to think in those terms.

Reluctantly, she finally nodded her head as James gave her a rueful smile. "Okay, James. We'll let her stay. For now."

But Lily wasn't quite finished yet. It'd be over her dead body before she let a fourteen-year-old, let alone her daughter, compete in the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

"James, I understand why she should be at Hogwarts, but there must be something we can do. She's in the Tri-Wizard Tournament at fourteen, for God's sake!"

"There's only so much we can do, Lily," James said with a grimace, "She's under a magically-binding contract; if Charlotte doesn't compete, she loses her magic."

"And at her age, that would probably kill her." Lily muttered. Louder, she said, "So we need to see the contract, figure out what we can do to get around the rules."

At this, the insufferable man painted a picture of mock innocence. "But, Lily-flower. The rules say once chosen, you stand alone. We'd be breaking the rules."

The mock horror only served to make Lily roll her eyes—her husband had a plan. At this, she asked, "How do you know the rules of the Tri-Wizard Tournament? Before this year, it hadn't occurred in over a century."
"Two centuries, my dear. And I'm simply wounded that you imply I'm ignorant on any subject." James played the part of a swooning damsel well—at least, before his countenance cracked with a crooked grin.

"Ye of little faith, Evans. Remember Sixth Year?"

"What does Sixth Year have to—Oh. Really?"

James nodded grimly. "Really. Padfoot and I spent the last month of summer researching ways to enter our names and possible tasks after hearing the rumors."

Lily raised a skeptical eyebrow at this. "Not Remus? You lot had been attached at the hip by then."

"Moony decided not to enter his name on the grounds that 'he wasn't a bloody lunatic with a death wish.'"

Lily laughed at this. Remus had always had the most sense out of any of them. At this thought, she couldn't help but wonder aloud at where Remus would fit into all this. James's eyes lit up at the reminder before he adopted a facade of faux innocence.

"Well, I had been thinking that a certain Remus J. Lupin would make an excellent proxy in the Wizengamot. I mean, once I start getting Padfoot's trial into place, I'll just be so busy, and I'll need someone I can trust to vote on legislation."

Lily raised an eyebrow. It was a good idea in principle, but most of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, as well as most of the elected, would have a panic attack at the thought of a werewolf among them. They certainly wouldn't stand for it, and neither would a certain Chief Warlock.

"Dumbledore won't like it. Unless he's changed his plan in the last decade, he'll still be trying to keep the peace with most of the Houses. And that means certain compromises with the status quo."

"Like hell I'll follow that."

The sheer vehemence in this statement caught Lily off guard as she gave James a worried, questioning look.

Normally, it was the other way around in these situations. At this, James explained, "Lily, it's already clear that Dumbledore has done next to nothing with his political power over the years, whether it was his fault, Lucius Malfoy's, or the Ministry's. If it's become bad enough that Malfoy's son is at it with Charley and Alice's boy as first years—well."

James stood up and began to pace, running his finger through his black hair as he paused, before going on. "Even when we were at school, nothing was escalated into anything resembling dueling until Fourth Year—"

"When you lot and the Death Eaters began to really go at it."

James nodded as he stopped in front of Lily, a wary look entering his eyes at the unspoken mention of Lily's former friend. Needless worry, to be honest. We made our choices—I know I hardly regret mine.

Changing the subject, Lily lightly commented, "I hope you're adding the Tri-Wizard Tournament and Sirius to that list."

A smirk tugged at the edges of his lips. "Does it even need to be said? And one more thing—"
Here James paused, and winced as Lily sharply motioned for him to continue, eyeing him suspiciously as he mused his hair in that idiotic way of his that he thought was endearing. Lily had no comment on the matter.

"Also—InordertogetSiriusatrialIneedtoclaimmytitle."

"Repeat that. Slowly." Lily hoped her gaze promised a hexing otherwise.

"In. . .In order to get Sirius a trial I need to claim my title to do it; no one else with a spot on the Wizengamot would sponsor an infamous criminal and get him a retrial, most likely." James winced at the end, clearly bracing himself for some reason, as Lily had to fight an urge to roll her eyes. Honestly, men.

"Right, then." James's glasses nearly fell off in his shock.

"Really? You're alright with it?"

"The man's your best friend, James. I'd have jinxed you to next month if you hadn't been thinking about it. I can handle anything Narcissa Malfoy or anyone else throws at me," Lily said as he sighed in relief.

"Great, that can be next on the list then."

Lily was tempted to ask when a specific list had been created, but decided against it. Doubtless, she'd find out anyway when James had re-united with Sirius and Remus and him. She swallowed a curse at the thought of that thrice-damned rat, before turning her mind elsewhere. For now. Also, she thought amusedly, plausible deniability was never a bad idea with the Marauders.

"—and Amelia's still around apparently according to Dumbledore, that'll make things easier, she's always been impartial for a Hufflepuff, and that's saying quite a bit. . ."

Ah, we're plotting again on how to get a trial that should have been thirteen years ago again. Good. Content to let her husband ramble for a while with a few interjections here and there, Lily pondered what this would mean to Charlotte. Even the Headmaster hadn't been sure of the extent of Sirius's and Charlotte's interactions in her Third Year, and possessed only suspicions on how the Animagus had escaped, due to a certain furry problem, apparently. Or how Charlotte had escaped a fully grown werewolf.

God, she was going to give Lily a heart attack if she kept that up.

"We'll protect her, Lily," James reassured her, snapping her out of her thoughts. "I promise."

"Like we did last time?" Lily snapped back.

"It'll be different this time," he reassured her—and him, judging from his tense body language. "For one, we have the advantage: Voldemort is barely a shell of himself, according to Dumbledore. He has no idea what's about to hit him, and is hardly up to his usual standards right now as it is."

"We can hardly battle a psychopath that can't seem to die when we don't even know how we're alive, James. You know as well as I do—true resurrection is impossible according to every rule of magic!"

James shrugged at this, a cheeky grin forming. "The rules never stopped me before, love. Or you, for
that matter. Plus, Pomfrey didn't find any sign of a foreign ritual or power other than our own power—plus family magic in your case. We're in fit fighting form!"

Lily rolled her eyes at her husband's antics, even as her lips twitched with the beginnings of a fond smile.

But James then visibly sobered, almost giving Lily a headache with his sudden change in mood as he gazed at the door out of which Charlotte had left earlier.

"This isn't the war anymore, Evans, and we're not alone on this one; and neither is Charley-girl. Not this time."

="The Childe's Protector was ... satisfied."

="It had fulfilled its directive."

="For all of the Threat's new machinations, she still be would be safe."
"In a world of locked rooms, the man with the key is king. And honey, you should see me in a crown."

-Professor Jim Moriarty, Sherlock

Barty Crouch Jr. was worried.

Until this morning, His Lord's plan had been going perfectly. The Brat-Who-Lived had been successfully entered into the Triwizard Tournament, Dumbledore *(the fool)* had been completely taken in by his disguise, and best of all, that traitor Karkaroff *(he would pay—)* was still scared shitless of him, even if he remained unaware of Barty's true identity.

His father's confusion had been rather delicious to watch too, bewildered as he was by the chaos caused he did his Lord's work. *(after all these years, his father was still so weak, so scared—)*

But James and Lily Potter had thrown everything out of alignment as always, Barty brooded angrily. As he stalked around the classroom, petrifying the second years *(were we once that small? that ignorant?)* as he did it, lecturing in a growl about the dangers of minor Dark creatures; it was Cornish Pixies and Imps today.

"—but unlike teachers of the past, I will not inflict them on you without practice—today."

The Second Years seemed to deflate at that, and through one eye, he could see two 'Claws releasing their grips on their wands behind him. *Definitely heard of Lockhart then. Bloody moron. Good paranoia, though.*

But only half his mind was on the class; as Barty moved back to the front of the classroom, he largely pondered the Potter Problem.

Positively every aspect of the whole thing had been an unpleasant surprise, from the Muggle-lover's inquiries about James Potter to the fact they *weren't bloody dead*; he had yet to figure how to turn it to his advantage. *(he couldn't fail Him, he mustn't—)*

He waved his wand to demonstrate *Petrificus Totalus* and demanded Eleanor Branstone *(Hufflepuff and top of her class; like him, underestimated)* list two spells from another class to use against Cornish Pixies as he thought over the addition of the Girl-Who-Lived's parents.

He had been aware of James Potter at school. *(who hadn't?)* As First Year to their Third, he had
scornfully watched as Potter and the traitor Black (Associating with such weakness, so lacking—) went through their education, flaunting friendships with the werewolf and their little spy (not then, then he had just been a shadow of his colorful friends) and who hadn't watched and gossiped as Severus Snape the future Potions Master (Another one, yet another who betrayed Their Lord—) and Lily Evans had fallen out—rather dramatically, too.

Barty had befriended Rabastan Lestrange that day as well, bonding over mutual scorn of the pathetic Slytherin. It had been a good day, to befriend such a future ally and fellow devotee to the Dark Lord as the Seventh Year.

But beyond that fateful day, things had been. . .different, Barty remembered as he concluded his lecture with one last threat. The war began to spill over into the school in earnest, with little room left for neutrality. Pranks were replaced with jinxes, and banter with curses, with the Marauders and student Death Eaters bulwarks of either side. As Barty ensconced himself behind his desk, he could have sworn his hands, even with Polyjuice coursing through him as he took another dose from Moody's flask, still twitched at the memory of his many duels with Sirius Black. (the filth, betraying his family and his kind, and for what—)

But back to the main point. He could hardly assassinate the Potters himself. The Tri-Wizard Tournament was still happening, and he was still needed by His Lord to guide the girl into Little Hangleton for his resurrection. He could hardly "blow his cover", as the muggles say.

In addition, Dumbledore informed him this morning the couple would go to Potter Manor (a noble home they didn't deserve, he did not deserve—) after arranging things with their brat, and short of the Dark Lord's orders, Barty wouldn't take on an Auror like James Potter in his own home; much less one with a wife that could curse like Lily Evans. She may have been a Mudblood, but she provided a bit more resistance than the rest of them during the war.

Perhaps instead of direct action, it would be better to create a contingency plan for the Dark Lord, Barty mused as he leveled a suspicious glare at the Second Years as he rolled Moody's magical eye around the room, inspecting the students in silence before issuing a brief homework assignment—nothing truly lengthy; an ex-Auror would have no use for essays—as one idea began to percolate in his mind. (yes. yes, that would do very nicely, and potentially kill two birds with one spell, and oh the fire it would spark—)

In the mean time, however, there was nothing preventing him from making life a little bit harder for the Brat-Who-Lived and her filthy parents. Sadly, in order to do so, he would have to bring in outside help, of which there was distressingly little. (traitors, turncoats, the lot of them—)

He considered his options as he took yet another swig from Moody's flask as the bell tolled the time and his students made their escape to lunch as he plodded back to his office—and a fireplace—to check on his latest batch of Polyjuice before anything else could be accomplished. (which of the faithless?)

In the mean time, he would wait, and ever be at His Lord's service.

Lucius Malfoy yielded to no one, and nothing. Well—not since the Dark Lord's defeat all those years ago at Godric's Hollow, that is. After his disappearance, he had been one of the first to manage to sever any possible connections between him and the cause. It had been unfortunate, to say the least, but the then-young lord had possessed no desire to wind up in Azkaban, and the Imperius Curse had been terribly convenient in court.
Originally, it had been for the Dark Lord—or so he had told himself. But as the weeks went by, Death Eaters were arrested, and Charlotte Potter was toasted across the country as the "Girl-Who-Lived"—a ridiculous title, regardless of any possible truth behind it—it soon became clear that Lucius's master was gone—and power was for the taking.

Never let it be said Lucius Malfoy was not an opportunist.

Quite frankly, he had never believed rumors of His survival to be any more than that: rumor and denial from the true fanatics like the Lestranges, and Crouch Junior.

However, lately it would seem that the Dark Lord was not be underestimated, even in death. Perhaps especially in death, it would seem.

For that was the only possible explanation for the man standing in front of him.

Barty Crouch Junior. Very much alive, and unless he was mistaken, dressed in the clothes of former Auror Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody. But who held the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was not his business right now, not with Draco reporting himself to be safe, and have no threats; rather, it was the identity of the man in front of him.

Lucius was naturally suspicious, despite the tested Dark Mark on the man's arm. It may have been the real article, but the man's sanity had clearly taken a beating over the years, judging from his haphazard appearance.

"Well, Lucius? Nothing to say to your old friend? No reminiscing of the old days in store?"

*Besides a good curse to shut you up? No, not particularly.*

But that would hardly go over well with a man proclaiming the Dark Lord's imminent return. Particularly a man who had been close with the Lestranges before the end of the War. Best take a more benign route, Lucius knew, unless he wanted to see what dear Bella had seen fit to teach him.

"I apologize; I hadn't realized your sense of fashion had changed so since I last saw you. Please, do sit down."

Barty gave an odd twisted grin as he remained standing, his tongue flickering out briefly—an unsettling habit that Lucius had never been quite sure was not deliberate—before giving an answer.

"Ah, you know how it is; one must change with the times, and all that. But I'm not here on pleasantries, Lucius."

"Oh? What business, then?"

"The Dark Lord sends his regards, as well as inquiries into the whereabouts of a certain Dark artifact."

If Lucius had been any less experienced in politics, he would have performed a double-take at this. As it was, he only raised a quizzical eyebrow as he moved to stand behind his desk, his back to Crouch as he observed a single white peacock outside in the rare November sunlight while he processed the revelation.

How had he known? Lucius had been careful in dealing with it; even if his handoff to the Weasley girl had been a little reckless, it had nearly gotten the job done. If Potter hadn't been quite so insistent on concerning herself with matters that didn't pertain to her, it would have been successful. No one, outside the little brat, Dumbledore, and possibly Arthur Weasley should have known.
But as quickly as Lucius sought an answer, it just as quickly fell into his head. Bella.

She must have received something of a similar ilk to it. His quite frankly psychotic sister-in-law, with her loyalty to the Dark Lord, would have been a perfect candidate for protecting a possession of the Dark Lord's, and she and Crouch had been moderately close.

A few careful seconds later, he turned his head back to the former Ravenclaw, plan firmly in mind. He couldn't possibly know exactly what Lucius was given.

"I am afraid you must elaborate, Bartemius—" The scowl he received at this was quite delicious, and Lucius could not help but savor it before continuing.

"As you know, my . . . collections are quite varied and extensive. If the Dark Lord requires my assistance, my family and I am his to command, but in order to do so, we must have clarification in our instructions. Otherwise, it would be far too risky for any action to be taken in today's political climate, what with Potter running around and the Triwizard Tournament in action. You understand, of course, given your. . . current status."

Surprisingly, the other man seemed unfazed, and even nodded in agreement with Lucius's words, and began to pace in front of the former Slytherin's desk as he spoke, seemingly pondering out loud.

"Yes, of course, Lucius. . .now, if memory serves me, I believe Our Lord mentioned he wished to be made aware of the location of a certain. . .book? I believe it was a—diary, amazingly enough, if memory serves."

Lucius set his jaw. If Crouch had been anyone else, he would have walked out of Lucius's study with neither body or memory intact.

Unfortunately, Crouch was not anyone else, and he doubted murdering someone as loyal to the Dark Lord and as powerful as Crouch currently was would go over particularly well. He had no choice but to cut his losses now. In a voice not unlike that which he used with Cornelius Fudge, Lucius began the dance.

"Ah. That one," he remarked. "I am afraid it is a rather. . .long story."

"You don't have it." And that was triumph in Crouch's eyes as he paused in front of Lucius, clearly ready to deliver a coup de grâce at will; the blonde could only be grateful the Dark Lord was currently incapable of casting the Cruciatius Curse. Though, that might have been less painful this would end up becoming.

"No. You may thank Arthur Weasley and Potter for that," Lucius replied tersely as he sat down behind his wooden desk, laying his hands together in front of him before continuing more easily, annoyance coloring his words. "Weasley's blasted house raids forced me to divest my home of a few heirlooms, and I could hardly sell off something given to me by the Dark Lord to Borgin & Burkes."

"But then who did y—the Weasley girl," Barty's eyes lit up, fully interested now before they narrowed. "Some of the Hogwarts professors mentioned an incident with her two years ago. But how did Potter destroy it?"

That the brat had been involved, much less destroyed the artifact, went unsaid. The number of times Draco had written Lucius to complain about the brat's latest antics was truly awe-inspiring. If it hadn't been his plans, the pure-blood aristocrat might have been almost impressed with her talent.

"Unknown," he said finally. "When it was returned to me, it looked as if it had been rescued from a
fire, but for the large puncture in the cover."

As the younger man’s face turned quizzical—doubtless attempting to figure what could destroy a Dark artifact like that—Lucius began to think. He was tempted to ask if Crouch had heard anything else as Alastor Moody, but decided against, for now. He had other worries, and it was doubtless that the Dark Lord would not be pleased with him if it was Crouch telling the story as it was. Reluctantly, he drew the fellow Death Eater back into conversation.

"Is there anything else you require of me, Crouch?" Lucius asked. He was relatively sure whatever Crouch threw at him through the opening could be dealt with easily. Relatively.

Crouch gave him a toothy smile.

"Why, yes actually. There are two. . .challenging deeds that must be accomplished, but I am sure that by doing them, any anger from the Dark Lord over your failures would be thoroughly mitigated."

Lucius gritted his teeth. "Whatever our Master requires."

Crouch’s face formed an expression of delight. "So glad you have re-joined the cause, Lucius."

"I never left."

"Of course," Crouch crooned. "Now, I find that there is a certain fireplace of mine that requires an upgrade."

Suspiciously, Lucius raised his eyebrows. "What kind of upgrade?"

"The warding kind. Specifically, the kind where the enchanters ask no questions."

He could feel a headache forming already. That kind of warding wouldn't come cheap, or without a favor or two called in. Narcissa was going to kill him.

"I can have you in contact with someone discreet by the end of the day."

"Excellent," Crouch responded, before stepping closer to Lucius as he continued to talk. "I would also like for you to. . .create a distraction. A public one. One to distract the attention of those whom neither you nor I would want looking too closely."

Lucius remained carefully blank. "A distraction for you, or for the Dark Lord?"

At this, Crouch chuckled. "The Dark Lord, of course—a show of good faith, if you will. You have been away for quite some time, Lucius, and He has wondered at how you renounced Him so quickly."

"After He fell, I was forced to take care of myself and my family, Crouch, and Azkaban would have done no good for anyone but Dumbledore. My true loyalty has always been to the Dark Lord, Crouch." Crouch abruptly turned around as he ceased to move, slamming his hands on the desk separating the two wizards.

"Is it? Is it, Malfoy." he hissed, his eyes dark with rage and something unnameable.

As the wild, fractured look entered his eyes Lucius had to suppress a shudder—Azkaban and Merlin knows what else had not been kind to the boy over the years, it would seem. Nevertheless, he was deliberate to respond in kind to the challenge.
"I am no turncoat, Crouch—and I will not fail Him again. Do not try and test me or my loyalty to Him again," Lucius said lowly, "I will do whatever He requires of me with pleasure."

He met the fanatic's eyes for another minute before Crouch suddenly released his grasp on the wooden antique and began to pace the marble floor once more while Lucius observed with disdain the new scratches left; he mentally noted to call for Gimsey later.

With a new veneer of a rather brusque calm, Crouch began to speak, not looking at Lucius. "Charlotte Potter's legal guardians are Muggles."

"Really? How...delightful," Lucius said lightly.

Frankly, it explained several things, if someone were to ask Lucius. But it also raised several questions, he considered. Such as what Dumbledore had been drinking. The Girl-Who-Lived, raised by Muggles? Was he determined to have the entirety of magical society led into the Muggle muck by their 'savior', or so terrified by someone—namely, Lucius—being introduced to her before she was fully indoctrinated? It certainly explained some of Draco's comments about her, and his claims of rudeness towards him.

Of course, Draco was occasionally bit hasty towards judgement. The possibility of any forgiveness on the part of either teenager was most likely impossible. It was a shame, Lucius mused. It would have made his entire conversation with Crouch far more tolerable.

Crouch smiled thinly. "Indeed. Talk to your *Daily Prophet* people. Have them dig something up on her."

Lucius raised his eyebrows. "Anything in particular?"

Crouch took a swig from a flask and began to walk towards the fireplace he had previously emerged from.

"Something big and chaotic and...controversial. Perhaps not entirely true, either. I don't care. Just make a statement, Malfoy. And be sure not to fail Him again."

"I never would, Crouch," he responded dutifully. Inwardly, Lucius briefly indulged himself in a wish for Crouch's failure concerning the Dark Lord.

The younger man appeared to have the same thought, if his grin was anything to go by. "Only time, I believe, will test, Lucius."

He then took a handful of Floo powder, but before departing through the roaring fireplace, paused for a moment, his face oddly contemplative—for Barty Crouch Junior, that was. For a moment, Lucius saw the nineteen-year-old boy trailing after Bella with all the devotion of a puppy. That is, if the puppy was determined to learn how to torture, murder, and eviscerate Muggles and blood traitors.

Such a charming woman, his sister-in-law.

"And—Lucius?" Crouch called where he stood. "It may interest you to know, that as of last night, James and Lily Potter are once more among the living, as verified by Albus Dumbledore and the Hogwarts nurse."

At this last parting shot, the aristocrat did let out a gasp in the privacy of his study as Crouch left, before immediately making for the bottle of one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old Firewhiskey Narcissa didn't know about. As he sat down in his armchair, he took a large swallow of the alcohol, winced as
the burn, and began to contemplate the seismic shift in priorities, as dictated, apparently, by Barty Crouch, lieutenant to the Dark Lord.

And James Potter and Lily Evans, damn them.

_Bastards. But then again, so are the rest of us._

Rita Skeeter knew she wasn’t a particularly good person.

No reporter with success like she had was, and to be honest, she had never particularly cared if did adhere to a set of prescribed morals. It took a special kind of person, she knew, to be a successful story-teller like her; a special intelligence and knack to sniff out headlines, to dig out secrets, to present things in a certain light so as to give readers what they wanted to hear: drama, heroes, villains, betrayal, the latest burning hot gossip!

To be honest, the truth was often so very _dull_; really, Rita was a special kind of heroine, for rescuing the British Wizarding World from such boredom, while giving them the truth they deserved to hear at the same time. Sadly, there had been little call for her talents, lately. The Weighing of the Wands for the Triwizard Tournament wouldn’t be for a few more weeks, and since the Quidditch World Cup, everyone had seemingly been determined to be as dull as possible. Rita had been utterly _bored._

Today, however, looked like it was going to be different, and happily, there would be little need to embroider the facts, what with Lucius Malfoy having walked through her door and delivering the greatest scandal since the escape of Sirius Black from Azkaban.

Charlotte Potter, the famous Girl-Who-Lived, Tri-Wizard Champion, left with _Muggles?_

James and Lily Potter alive? Resurrected on the night of Samhain, via an unknown, most likely Dark, method?

The newspaper would be sold out for months. The story of the year, if not the decade! This was a story that would enrapture the wizarding public and the sheep for ages upon ages, and Rita would write every piece that mattered.

Every drop of scandal, all with her name attached to it—and people said there was no Father Christmas.

"Well, Ms. Skeeter?" Rita shook herself out of her dreaming at the familiar derisive tone, and addressed its owner with _grudging_ respect.

"Of course, Lord Malfoy. It would be my pleasure. But, you are, of course, aware it would be an expensive enterprise, more so than my usual? They are _Muggles_, after all. To gather the required intervention without outside interference And to go unseen in a national memorial such as the Potter’s house in Godric’s Hollow. . .I imagine I’d require help to fully achieve what you desire."

But even as she wondered out loud, Malfoy’s expression remained blank and unimpressed. "Be careful not to push yourself, Skeeter. Even my generosity and your _talents_ have limits."

"Of course, completely understandable!" she chirped, hiding her fear and anger with ease. Her talents, indeed. It was nothing compared to what he had done, or what she had helped him do. "We are, of course, speaking of the same generosity that you offer to the Minister, I presume, just between you and dear Cornelius."

A smirk stretched her crimson lips as ire flashed in his eyes, igniting a fierce smugness in her chest. If
the day would came where she went down, it would certainly not be an empty cell.

"Indeed," Lord Malfoy said coldly. "The address is unknown, but not hard to find, I imagine, for someone with your resources. Do be careful to keep my name out of this, except as a sympathizer to the girl, of course."

"Of course, of course. What of the Potters?" Rita asked, as she raised her freshly manicured eyebrows and gave a lazy wave of her wand to her quill.

Lord Malfoy gave a slight smirk, even as he adopted a benevolent air. Rita's Quick-Quotes Quill began to scribble across parchment as he began to wax on the issue quite eloquently, if she did say so herself.

"What of the Potters indeed," he repeated drily. "Really, I'm quite worried for Miss Potter. . .finding out she had been left with Muggles was shock enough to myself— but to hear that her parents are alive, after all these years? And just when she has been announced a fourth Champion within the Trizwizzard Tournament?" Malfoy's lip began to curl with disdain, creating a stark contrast to his saccharine tone, and Rita had to suppress a thrill of glee at the clear implication.

Dumbledore would have to watch his back, to say the least. She had already seen rumblings, ever since Black had managed to infiltrate Hogwarts last year, and with the Tournament being hosted at Hogwarts—with a reluctant Headmaster, no less—certain political alliances had been watching his moves with great interest.

This would be so much fun.

"I have nothing but the highest regard for Albus Dumbledore," Lucius Malfoy continued, "But to leave her with Muggles, instead of a good magical family? I cannot profess to know his motivations, or the full circumstances, but I must wonder if he made the best decision in this matter—or, if he indeed was capable."

The reporter smirked. She had made the headlines for a week with far less than this. This time, The Daily Prophet's front page would be her domain for months, if she was lucky.

As the aristocrat swept out of the room with an elegant sweep of the cloak, and his cane tapping the floor, Rita's eyes gleamed; her editor would be ever so pleased.

And I had been simply dying to stretch my wings; Godric's Hollow seems a lovely place to start. There is nothing to be done with the Muggle neighborhood, I suppose.

Peter Pettigrew was a rat, in every sense of the word. This hadn't been a new truth to him for a long, long time.

He had known this since the age of thirteen, when he had discovered his Animagus form and had gained an inkling of his destiny, as great and terrible as it was.

He'd fought it, yes—through their Seventh Year, there had been no one more loyal to James Potter and Sirius Black than Peter Pettigrew!—but after Hogwarts, things had. . .evolved. No longer was it exchanging increasingly ridiculous hexes with Slytherins in the hallways and pranking junior Death Eaters while laughing the whole way back to their warm dormitory; the War had come for them, and as members of the Order of the Phoenix, they were constantly battling, dodging malicious curses and spitting in the face of death, going back to beds that held little but more of the nightmare created by being on the front lines.
Well, not always him, of course. James and Sirius had far more magical talent and bravado, then he, and Remus was one of the best at watching someone's backs in a fight. No, Peter had been better off in the shadows, gaining intelligence in his Animagus form before and after any battle, stealing what he could from the enemy. And, he supposed, that had been its own brand of daring, listening to a gloating Travers one night, or running to Dumbledore with news of an impending raid the next.

But he'd still had to fight.

And, well. Contrary to what the Sorting Hat had said, Peter had always known he wasn't particularly brave. Pragmatic, rather. He'd just wanted to be better. He had wanted to achieve the heady idealistic heights that Sirius and James had made their homes. And, for a while, Peter liked to think he had achieved that.

So, everything had been fine, or as fine as it could get, for a while. He was happy doing his part in the war, away from any major fighting with Death Eaters. Just the occasional skirmish for Peter Pettigrew, usually accompanied with quick back-up, and James's "Be careful, Wormtail!", Sirius's "Mate, don't get in over your head," and his personal favorite, from Remus, "I don't know what we'd do if we lost you, Pete."

Once in a while, he had gotten fond relief from Lily while Benji Fenwick had patched him up, but those had hurt more than they soothed; he had always felt inadequate when next to Lily, after years of James extolling her virtues and brilliance.

But then Cokeworth happened. It had been nothing new, at first. The Death Eaters using Muggles for sport was common enough in the War, and Fenrir and his pack had been among the worst of the lot, second only to the Lestranges. But when the name of the town came up, Peter had learned a new shade of gray when the colors had drained out of James's face. At the first reports, James and Black had gone charging off; but with Remus on a deep-cover assignment due to his furry problem, Peter had been forced to go.

They managed to arrive in time to save Lily, and help her fight them off.

There was nothing to be done for her parents.

What Peter had seen that day—the macabre sight of Mr. and Mrs. Evans, and their neighbors, quite literally torn apart by Greyback and his pack... .

He hadn't been alone in retching upon arrival. And as he'd recovered and rolled onto his back, Peter could not help but stare at the Dark Mark still hanging up in the night sky, covering the stars. The mark had seemed to be taunting them, in all of its black superiority.

That night it had become clear: to oppose the Dark Lord was foolishness that would get them killed, as if they were—were Muggles, as helpless and lacking as Lily's parents had been.

Peter had always been good at creating a second plan after the first went awry.

He had gone, then, to Evan Rosier. As far as Death Eaters had gone at Hogwarts, he had been—kind, almost, to Peter. Sensible.

And with that sensibility, Rosier had listened. He listened long enough that when Peter ran out of words, he was taken to Voldemort, and became an informant. It had been neither easy nor painless, but Peter had gotten by those long, dark days on one thing: he could save them. After His inevitable victory, he could negotiate, protect his friends, protect James and Sirius and Remus and Lily, and maybe Alice and Frank and Neville. He could save even little Charlotte, the potential Prophecy
Child, for Merlin's sake, from being part of the War at all, from ever having to know that violence.

As a Muggle Prime Minister had said, it would be peace in their time.

For once, Peter Pettigrew would be the strong one, after so many years of ridicule, and being dismissed, being forced to rely on others where he failed. He would be the one to protect others from the boogeyman in the night.

Everyone would be safe.

But then Halloween had come and You-Know-Who had demanded the reason Peter hadn't been murdered on sight. The secret Peter had demanded he take on, because he needed value to the Dark Lord and Sirius would be killed otherwise, he knew it—

But it turned out to be for nought. The fall of the Dark Lord to a mere babe, the apparent death of his friends, and Peter realized what he had done.

The self-fulfilling prophecy had occurred; for all of his fighting against fate, Peter was still a rat, would always be a rat, the traitor, responsible for the destruction of his patchwork family.

James and Lily had died, and Charlotte had been left screaming into the cold night for parents who would never come. And Peter—Peter had no master left to protect him, no friends left in the Order after what he had done. Rosier had been Merlin knew where, and the rest would have happily seen him dead or in the hands of the Dementors.

But never let it be said Peter Pettigrew was not pragmatic, even in the face of disaster.

Or that Sirius Black lacked tenacity, for that matter.

He ran, and the hound pursued, until finally, he created a chance. A rather slim possibility in the first place, but Peter had improved his acting over the previous year; after spying for so long, it was almost easy. Peter had only to declare to the world what they already believed, fire off a strategic Bombarda, and transform into his baser self, hiding until he found a kind, if rather strident, redhead boy to look after him. And then, he waited, warm and comfortable in a home that none of the Marauders had the chance to make; though sooner than expected, Peter knew James and Lily had hoped to give Charlotte at least one sibling, maybe even two, after the war.

But the rest, as they say, was history, Peter couldn't help but think bitterly, coming to an odd sort of attention as what remained of the Dark Lord awoke. James and Lily were alive, as Crouch had furiously informed him, as if it were Peter's fault, and ready to try and protect their daughter again.

Quickly, as the Dark Lord turned to call for him, he shook off the last of his memories, and tightened what mental shields he had.

"Wormtail?" He had to suppress a shudder at the cold voice, terror causing him to sweat as he dutifully answered.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Bring me Nagini for feeding."

"At once, my Lord."

But He wasn't finished yet, much to Wormtail's worry, giving him a second directive.
"And afterward," Lord Voldemort continued coldly, "I will need you to go and bring me some certain items."

"My Lord?" he asked confusedly.

"The game has changed, Wormtail. And if your account is anything to go by, our plans must change with it."

As he hurried to fulfill his Master's commands, Wormtail spared one last thought for Lily and James, and wondered if they knew the sheer futility of it all, and what exactly they die at the hands of once more.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I had waaaay too much fun writing this chapter. Also, yes, the last section is totally my head-canon of Wormtail's motivations.
Charlotte felt almost dizzy with revelations.

Well, yes, there still was the Triwizard Tournament to contend with—the First Task was only three weeks away, and it could be dragons for all she knew—as well as figuring out who put her name in the Goblet Fire, it was impossible to not be reassured by the fact that her parents were alive, and with her. Even now, as she ambled down the hallways of Hogwarts, she had kept fighting, and failing, at keeping a silly grin off her face.

God, that would never get old. Charley certainly hoped it never did.

As she approached a corner on her way to Gryffindor Tower in search of Neville and Hermione, she heard the familiar Scottish burr of Professor McGonagall drift around a corner. Automatically, she began to slow her steps.

"...Miss Potter will be leaving shortly from Professor Dumbledore's office—" she said, in a familiar lecturing tone.

"Joining who, Professor?" The interruption slipped out, causing her to wince.

Please don't let it be Snape, please don't let it be Snape, please—

"Charlotte James Potter, where have you been?!" Hermione shrieked as she whirled around, Neville hot on her heels.

Never mind. I'll take Snape.

Charlotte opened her mouth to respond, only to find she had no idea what to say, beyond the obvious.

"Complicated," she finally said with a wince.

Unsurprisingly, the one-word answer didn't cause Hermione to calm down. "Well, un-complicate it, then! We've been worried sick! We haven't seen you since this morning, and that fight with Smith and Jones! Do you know—"
Charley was bracing herself for—not entirely undeserved—Hermione Granger Lecture, when Professor McGonagall intervened.

"If I may—" The trio turned their heads to the Transfiguration professor, who looked far too amused at Charlotte's predicament. "If I may; Miss Granger, if you want an answer, I would suggest letting Miss Potter get a word out, since it is, as she put it, quite complicated."

Hermione ducked her head at the mild reprimand before she turned back to Charlotte, and slightly more meekly than before, asked, "Well?"

Charlotte shifted on her feet, and realized that she had no idea what to say.

*My parents somehow came back from the dead, still love me, and have spent the last couple hours talking about Quidditch and school rivalries and my godfather?*

*She'd* think she was mad.

At her silence, Professor McGonagall commented with a knowing look, before leaving the three of them, "I always find the beginning an appropriate place to start, Potter, if you're struggling to begin."

Charley nodded, more to herself than anyone else.

"Right, right. Well, after everyone left Dumbledore's office," she finally began haltingly. "Dumbledore told me that something had come up, having to do with my—my parents."

"Your parents?" Hermione asked incredulously. "What would they have to do with anything?"

"Well," Charley said, "He wanted to talk about the fact that they were, alive, somehow."

Neville went white, and Hermione gasped.

"And. . .they were there." Charley finished, her giddy smile from before returning slightly.

"Charley," Hermione said, hushed. "Are you alright?"

"You weren't. . .hurt? They were James and Lily?" Neville added, his eyes wide and dark against his face.

Charley nodded. "He told me that they had been checked by him and Madam Pomfrey, that they were who they claimed they were. And we—we. . .talked."

Silence. Abruptly, Charlotte missed the brief buffer Professor McGonagall had provided, as she felt rather raw all over again, and her eyes prickling again with the tell-tale sign of tears, as she finally said it out loud to someone else.

*My parents are alive, and I talked to them."

"What—what did you talk about?" Neville asked quietly, with a strange look on his face, almost of longing, and—oh. Oh.

She was a prat. A first-class one, to rival Percy Weasley. Charley should have realized. A memory from their First Year sprang to mind, when she had taken Neville to the Mirror of Erised for the first time under the Cloak.

"Look, Neville, can't you see them, my parents?"
"W-w-what? Charley, t-those aren't y-your p-p-parents in t-there. . .they're m-mine."

Three years later, she had received her greatest desire—something they both knew he would never receive, short of a miracle.

The Crucius Curse tended to be stubborn like that.

"Charley? Are you all right?"

Charley shook herself. Right. No going off with the fairies, Potter.

"Oh, uh, we talked about a fair bit—Quidditch, to begin with," she tacked on with an uncomfortable grin, before looking up and spotting a group of loud firsties coming down the hallway. She glanced at her friends. "Should we go to the library, keep this quiet?"

"Library. And don't think you're getting out of telling all, research or no, Char." Hermione warned as they once more took off. At the unprompted nickname, of course, Charlotte could only give one response.

"Wouldn't dream of it, 'Mione."

Much to her delight, this was greeted with an indignant squawk.

"Don't. Call. Me. 'Mione!"

"So, just make sure I have this straight," Hermione began as she, Charley, and Neville slammed their books down on a table. "James and Lily Potter were resurrected by some mysterious force that even Dumbledore couldn't figure—"

"Are we really using him as the standard here?" Charley interrupted. Her opinion of the Headmaster was still rather low, almost beating out the aftermath of last year, with Professor Lupin fired, Sirius escaped despite Dumbledore's best efforts to not listen to people who weren't grumpy gits, and everyone highly suspicious as what, exactly, Hermione, Neville, and Charley got up to in the off-hours of the castle.

"Meddler or not, Charley, he's still forgotten more magic than we've ever learned. In that respect, he is the standard." Hermione's tone was extremely long-suffering, and Charlotte had to suppress a snicker—the tone hadn't changed since the first time they had hit the books for facts about Nicholas Flamel in their First Year.

"Point taken. You were saying, Hermione?" Hers, on the other hand, was all innocence, learned from years of watching the Weasley Twins.

Hermione rolled her eyes, but continued as she discarded a slim volume. "Right, as I was saying, your parents are somehow still alive?"

"More like, they did die, and were dead. Now, they just. . .aren't." Charley said with a wince.

"You do realize you sound absolutely mad, don't you?" Hermione asked, not unkindly.

"Yeah, I do," Charlotte said defensively. "That doesn't mean I'm wrong."

"She's not denying that," Neville reassured her, "It's just. . .some people will think that you're mad, especially with the Tournament going on."
"Honestly, I don't see how people would think I'm insane," Charlotte huffed. "I know the whole entering-my-name thing would convince some people I'm an arrogant toe-rag, but crazy?"

Neville, in a rare moment of sarcasm, only raised his eyebrows and said, deadpan, "Remind me, which one of us battled a Basilisk at the age of twelve?"

"Shut up, Neville," Charlotte growled. "Besides, at least I wasn't mooning over Gilderoy bloody Lo—"

Hermione squawked indignantly. "I didn't moon ov—"

"So, Charley, did either of them mention Snuffles?" Neville interrupted in an attempt at heading off the quarrel as he raised his thick A Track of Tri-Wizard Tasks in front of him. It was, she supposed, for the best. Lockhart remained a bit of a sore spot with Hermione, particularly considering he had freaked out Charlotte the entire year, for reasons she still wasn't quite able to name, and mentioning him was one of the best ways to rile her up.

"Right before I left, actually," Charlotte replied, glowering. "And you don't have to whisper his name, Neville, the only other person in here besides us is Pince, and she's on the other side of the library terrifying everyone else. My parents, Dumbledore, and Professor McGonagall were talking when Dad asked if I knew where I would be able to reach one Sirius Orion Black."

"You must have almost had a heart attack," Hermione sympathized, Lockhart forgotten. "To have that dropped on you must have been awful. What did the teachers say? Is Sirius finally going to a trial?"

"Sounds like it. M-My Mum and Dad are working on it. I had to go and write off another letter to Sirius afterwa—Oh." Charlotte stopped as she stared at the article in front of her. That looked rather noble and death-defying and pointless and all those other words used to describe this ridiculous competition.

"Oh, what?" Neville inquired.

"I just found something detailing the bloody, fiery death of someone who tried to out-fly a dragon in 1777," Charlotte said faintly. "The same year, the champion from Hogwarts had their throat ripped out by a Wampus. Seriously, they're just letting me compete in this?"

"It's barbaric and cruel," Hermione asserted hotly. "In other words, similar to a large portion of the Wizarding World. According to A Comprehensive History of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, there have been fifteen separate years where the last champion left alive was declared the winner by default, and another twenty-seven where at least two of the competitors were left either mortally injured or permanently crippled."

"Sounds like fantastic odds," Charlotte muttered with a wince, while Neville nodded in agreement.

"Even in the eighteenth century, there was already some backlash." Hermione continued, now an anger-fueled roll. "A case was brought before the International Confederation of Wizards, even, in 1723 where the father of a student murdered in the tournament, a Lord Aleksandar Slovenski from Bulgaria, sued for the end of the Tournament after a Dementor took the soul of his son. However, the petition was denied after two weeks of mediation, an action that resulted in Slovenski—"

"She's never going to stop, is she?" Charlotte muttered to Neville as Hermione kept on about the magical Bulgarian aristocrat.

Neville smiled slightly, and only stuttered back, "Nope. And t-thank Merlin for that."
"Aren't either of you listening?" Hermione demanded as she looked up at the pair. "This is vital information!"

"How important are we talking here, Hermione—Trelawney's latest prediction of my death important, or my godfather-turned-out-to-not-be-a-mass-murderer-after-all-important?" Charlotte inquired. As the three Gryffindors knew all too well, there was a rather... gargantuan difference between the two, particularly after the end of their Third Year.

"Split the difference," Hermione replied drily.

"Peter Pettigrew is dead, seeing as you killed him!" Charlotte snarled, wand in one hand and painfully familiar cloak in the other, as she planted herself in front of her friends, determined to protect them from the believed enemy—him.

Merlin, she looked so much like her parents.

"I meant to, believe me... but little Peter got away from me that night—something that won't happen this time." Sirius lunged forward, throwing off the weight of the cat as he reached for the desperately squeaking rodent as Pettigrew made his bid for freedom, the Killing Curse on his lips—

"EXPELLIARMUS!"

The world blurred as he was thrown back by the over-powered spell and his head shattered a rotting bed post, causing the entire four-poster to collapse on top of him, rendering him senseless.

Some time later, the Animagus rolled off and struggled to his feet with a groan, though whether it was seconds or minutes later, he wasn't sure. As Sirius redirected his attention to the scene playing out in front of him, he couldn't help but wince at the newly formed headache; Charlotte and her friends certainly all packed a punch.

"—could turn into a rat, how could you tell which one?"

Remus was still explaining then, judging by the question. Silently, he hobbled over to an increasingly pale Remus, who threw him an appraising, worried look before turning back to answering the other girl—what had she been called? Danger? Granger, that was it.

"A finger was all that they found of Peter Pettigrew, was it not, Miss Granger? Now, look at the paw of the rat here."

The scarred werewolf slowly approached the currently less aggressive, but far warier trio and what seemed to be a Petrified Wormtail—in every sense of the word he noted, pleased.

After an exchange of glances, the two girls helped Frank and Alice's son into a more comfortable seating position before he cautiously offered the traitor to Remus to be studied, everyone carefully ignoring the squeaks rising in pitch the closer Sirius came to Pettigrew. Good. Sirius intended to make this as painful as his own stay in Azkaban.

Without his family.

"But, but that would mean..." Charlotte looked like she was ready to be sick as she turned her head toward him, before disbelief and a strange kind of stubbornness took over and settled into her features.

"Prove it, then."
"What?"

He couldn't have heard that right. Twelve years, and the first person to ask for evidence is the daughter of his best friend, the one who had every reason to want him dead, and not someone who was meant to carry out justice?

Actually, that probably said something about either him or his family, if Sirius were honest with himself.

"Prove. It. You say that Peter bloody Pettigrew was really Secret Keeper, was the one who betrayed my parents, and has somehow been alive all these years? Prove it."

Sirius raised an eyebrow at the growled challenge, and with a zealous grin and sense of drama he hadn't felt in ages, gestured to Remus.

"If Mister Moony would be so kind as to do the honor, Mister Padfoot would like to request that he commits the big reveal?" Said Mister Moony's mouth quirked in wry amusement, and began to play along for him and their bemused audience—particularly his goddaughter.

"Seeing as Mister Padfoot is both ever so kind to Mister Moony and lacking in the competence necessary to acquire a wand—"

"Oi!"

"—Mister Moony would gladly do the deed. If Mister Padfoot and friends would step back, please."

Eyes fixed upon the rat the entire time, Sirius moved back half a meter, deliberately placing himself in front of Charlotte and her friends; ten minutes and one Homo Reverti later, they were walking beneath the Shrieking Shack, Pettigrew bound and at wand-point with the Granger girl supporting Longbottom.

As Charlotte and Sirius led their strange little procession through the dark with their lit wands, he noticed her repeated guilty glances at him—in particular—with far too much pity and worry in her eyes. And that was when it truly hit Sirius, what all of this meant, from his escape to their strange parade underneath the Whomping Willow.

With Pettigrew captured and his name about to cleared, he, miraculously enough, would have a chance to finally be the godfather Prongs had intended him to be.

Merlin, he would never be able to make up for any it—twelve lost years, prioritizing her below revenge, any of it. But Sirius could certainly try.

But here was as good a place to start as any, he supposed. If she let him.

"Don't bother feeling bad about it, Charlotte. As far as you knew, a madman had just lunged for your friend—to be sure, neither of your parents would have stood for it." Sirius gave her a ghost of a grin, and attempted to mask his unease.

"Charley—I mean, I prefer Charley," she corrected. "And I am sorry, Mister Black."

If he hadn't grown up with his psychotic excuse for a family, the elder Gryffindor would have missed the tell-tale tightening of the lips and flash of emotion in those hauntingly familiar green eyes. Resolutely ignoring the growing paranoia in the back of his head—all everything, amazingly enough had almost been too easy—Sirius attempted to engage Charley.
"Hi there Sorry, I'm Serious, pleasure to meet you. Merlin's pants, don't call me 'Mister Black'."

At the familiar soft snort and toss of black hair, he almost banged his head into the ceiling.

At this success, Sirius continued to try his luck. "You know, has anyone ever told you —"

"I have my father's looks, and my mother's eyes?" Charley said monotonously. Sirius winced. The guarded anger was back, and for good reason.

Physically, she was the spitting image of James with hints of Dorea, but for the eyes and nose — those were most definitely Lily's. It was easy to pass her off as her parents' legacy, nothing more.

But for one thing.

Well, several, actually. Even as he still struggled to shake off the effects of the Dementors, he still had two eyes: she still was her own person, with her own unique traits. For one, he never remembered Lily having the exact same charming, crooked grin her daughter had sported just a moment ago, or Prongs giving such an icy piercing glare when furious.

"Actually, I was going to ask if anyone had ever told you stories about your parents? I don't know how much Remus told you, but your father was one of my best friends while we were in school together —he made me your godfather, actually."

Charley brightened with interest, giving him another smile before pausing as the pair froze to listen for what at first sounded to be almost like footsteps outside the Willow. They continued on, approaching the end of the tunnel, Remus and the other three behind them.

"What can you tell me? And I know —that is —I already knew —" Charley stuttered out her question.

But Sirius would never find out what she knew.

"Expelliarmus!"

The familiar loathed tones of one Snivellus Snape robbed the Third Year of her wand, and Sirius growled as he stepped in front of his goddaughter, separating her from the sneering Potions Master and Death Eater.

"Congratulations, Miss Potter, for having officially exceeded your father in sheer stupidity and recklessness; I applaud you."

Sirius Black nearly fell off Buckbeak as he started awake, scrambling for a shield from a greasy assailant long gone, only to find, instead, a screech owl giving him a judgemental stare a meter away.

With a groan, he sat up and reached for the letter the owl bore, Snuffles emblazoned across it in a now-familiar scrawl. Automatically, he smiled at the promise of more news from Charley, before confusion quickly came to the forefront of his mind.

Sirius grabbed the letter and ripped it open, scanning the letter.

Then, he read it again, his throat dry and hands shaking.

And then he read it one more time, before the parchment slipped out of his hands, and Sirius let out a more than slightly maniacal laugh as

He had always had a complicated relationship with the concept of family. If you asked him about it
years ago and James had, he would have given either a cheeky or flirty response amounting to the same thing: who needed relatives with such friends as his?

Which, to be fair, was more than fine as time went on. Prongs and Moony had been all but his brothers in blood, and Evans had made a fun sister-in-law. The similarities had certainly fooled people into believing they were actually brothers a time or two, what with certain proclivities.

He and James had always maintained a flair for the dramatic in life and pranking, for example. Which, yes, led to some rather interesting situations, such as the Great Hamster Accident of '76, which they had absolutely nothing to do with, Professor Kettleburn, honest.

But the point still remained. He and James maintained, relished, even, a flair for the surprising and dramatic.

Which still made this bloody ridiculous.

You just couldn't afford to let me outdo you, Prongs?

Every spell he had run on the second letter Charlotte had sent him had come up clean, which meant, almost inconceivably—'I've told you, Padfoot, that word doesn't mean what you think it means, just ask Lily—James and Lily were still alive, and vouching for his innocence.

At this bloody fantastic train of thought, however, he couldn't help but huff out a shaky breath, and he read his goddaughter's messy scrawl once more, before dashing off possibly the shortest letter he had written to Remus.

Snuffles,

God, how do I start? There's no easy way to put this. Lil—Ja—

My parents are alive. No one is quite sure how —no one who's saying, anyway. Dumbledore and Pomfrey are sure they are who they claim to be, after checking them out; my Dad said that he's probably going to still be feeling bruises next Halloween after the examination in the hospital wing.

Today's All Saints, and I was able to speak with them; they said they're going to get you a trial, Snuffles, an actual trial before the Wizengamot with Veritaserum. No one asked where you were, but I was thinking last year's showdown would be the best place to meet, seeing as most of Britain is still convinced that you're a mass-murdering criminal. Try and write Moony in America to have him come with you if you get the chance; there's no post owl in Hogwarts or Hogsmeade that can handle trans-Atlantic flight.

They're alive, Padfoot. And they're here.

Hope you and Buckbeak are well,

C

Sirius sighed as he re-read the letter, and leaned back against the rough bark of his current shelter—an extremely old, and currently very wet Yew tree—as he watched the miniature furball of an owl he had found fly off into the distance with a letter addressed to one Remus J. Lupin, currently of New York City.

On one hand, it was news of a kind of joy Sirius had been convinced he'd never experience again, and, well. . . Sirius was a selfish bastard.
On the other hand, it was almost too good to be true. His best friends alive? The trial that had been one of his dearest wishes for over a decade, and a pardon so close he could taste it? All of it with absolutely no strings attached?

It positively stank of a trap.

And on the third hand—and Sirius was starting to run out of hands here—if someone knew about the code name Charlotte was using for him as well as, well, *Moony*, than that meant one way or another, she was in trouble—as in, given-to-the-Dementors-by-a-corrupt-Minister-trouble. And, well. That still meant going north, and all the more quickly. It certainly meant an easy decision for Sirius.

*No one has ever accused me of getting anywhere by being cautious.*

Mind made up, the former Gryffindor rose to his feet, and another bolt of lightning arced through the dark sky. Sirius hauled himself onto Buckbeak, and dug in his heels to take flight into the night.

---

*It wasn't a trap.*

There was only one thought running through Sirius's head as he stood up from the dilapidated bed that five months ago, had contained the battered forms of three furious teenagers too curious and too powerful for their own good.

They had been right, in retrospect; he had needed to pay. But not for betrayal; poor judgment, yes. Trusting Peter Pettigrew, when in retrospect, all the signs had been there; the missed meetings, the increased nervousness, insisting he become Secret Keeper, suggesting that *Remus* of all people would ever betray them—

Sirius had been a fool.

"Merlin's pants, Padfoot; you look like shit."

Sirius was startled out of his reverie and whipped around to find two people he had never thought he would see again. Much less looking like they hadn't aged a day.

Sirius attempted a fitting response. "J-James. Lily."

*Oh, real smooth, Black. Stutter in front of your resurrected best mate and his wife.*

It seemed to fly over the couple's heads though; Prongs was staring in a mix of—Horror? Elation?—disbelief at Sirius, taking in everything from the slightly shabby clothes to the shattered-glass eyes and recent hair-cut, to his still slightly too-scrawny frame. Lily had covered her mouth and stared as he observed the two and there it was; the grief in those green eyes was far too familiar for his comfort.

"So. Any chance you'll share the Philosopher's Stone you found with me, then?" Sirius tried. "Azkaban's not exactly good for the skin, you know—even with such fabulous looks as mine."

James gave up a choked chuckle, but said nothing else as silence fell again upon the dilapidated room and its occupants.

Finally, Lily threw up her hands. "Screw this. Black, come here and give your fellow emotionally constipated prat a hug."

"Evans, I—"
"It's Potter, you git. And give James a hug before I curse your balls off for having the idiocy to—"

"Fine, fine," Sirius exclaimed hurriedly. No one messed with Lily when she started threatening limb and manhood. And truth be told, it'd be nice to confirm I'm not hallucinating.

After a brief moment of eye contact, the long-haired Gryffindor kicked what remained of his pride to the curb and swept across the room to fiercely embrace his best friend. Embarrassingly enough, he felt his eyes begin to sting a minute later; as he pulled back, he noticed James's frames, still so similar to his memories, had begun to fog up as well.

"Look at you, Padfoot—look at you. You—you're old, now," On the word old James's voice cracked; Sirius found it difficult to care, or to muster one up one of his usual cheap cracks at James never making it through puberty.

He could do far better, after James came back from the dead.

"Still better-looking than you; I'm not that old, Prongs. Age has given me a certain dignity you currently lack," Sirius shot back smoothly.

James tilted his head, a smirk curling his mouth up. "And yet, only one of us is married, and getting —"

But before James could finish putting his foot in his mouth, Sirius turned his head to the right and called out, "You know, we're open to this one becoming a threesome, Evans. Haven't seen you in over a decade, either."

"I'm afraid I must turn down the offer, Lord Black; last I checked, I was in this annoying little thing called a marriage." Lily responded drily, even as she walked over to give Sirius a brief, warm hug, before she stepped back and delivered him a harsh slap, causing him to stagger back from James, shocked as anger twisted her features.

"And that was for having the idiocy to get yourself in fucking Azkaban," Lily snapped. "And I swear to the gods, Sirius, you ever do something like that again, I will personally eviscerate your reckless ass."

Sirius opened his mouth to defend himself, but before any words came out, he fully noticed for the first time the state of his family: James's hair was wilder than he'd ever seen it—hardly a result of Quidditch, he suspected, and unless he was very much mistaken, that was Lily's handiwork in his wardrobe. She, however, had shaking hands, eyes just this side of glistening, and neither looked like they had seen a bed recently.

Now that he actually looked, Sirius realized he didn't see Charley anywhere either.

He'd faced facts a long time ago; there were better ways to be put in Azkaban than how he had gone about it, if that were possible. Like not leaving your baby goddaughter to a half-giant in a chilly English night for some half-baked idea of revenge, and winding up in prison for it. Lily, James, even Remus—hell, especially Remus—would have gone about it far better, if roles had been switched.

Sirius began to pace in front of the couple, fiddling absentmindedly with his wand. "You're right. I was...just stupid with grief, and I didn't prioritize what—who—I should have, and Lily, James, I can never apologize enough or—"

"Sirius."

"—make it up to—"
"Sirius Black."

"—or Charley—what?" Sirius broke off to ask. "Lily, I know I fucked up, and I'm so, so incredibly sorry."

"Yes, we know," Lily sighed. "But things will be alright—I'm not saying everything will be better over night—but it'll get better. We have a plan."

In the back of his mind, Padfoot perked up at Lily's words.

"Does it entail me getting a trial, perchance?" he inquired, cautious with hope. James mockingly clutched his chest, giving Sirius a betrayed look.

"Padfoot, I'm hurt, nay, mortally wounded, at your lack of faith in my talents here. Marauders aren't so plebeian as to get you a mere trial. I am getting you a *stage*—the Veritaserum is free of charge."

*Finally.* But before Sirius surrendered to the joy building inside him, a distant memory struck him, of several long nights with Charlus at Potter Manor before Sixth Year, and working out his new position after leaving his dear old mum. And Regulus, of course.

"You're going to have to formally claim your title, aren't you?" Sirius asked worriedly.

James shrugged, seemingly nonchalant about it. "I have no choice—but it won't be that bad."

The canine Animagus choked while Lily snorted.

"Remind me—who was the one complaining about making nice with, and I quote, 'Arseholes like Malfoy and Yaxley'?" Lily reminded him.

At this, Sirius couldn't help but laugh out loud. "She is right, mate. It wasn't just because of the War you refused to get involved with that particular cesspit."

"True—but neither did you, for the same reasons."

Sirius shrugged. "What can I say? Great Marauder minds think alike."

Lily rolled her eyes with a muttered "Boys," under her breath while James grinned. "Speaking of Marauders, where *is* our erstwhile companion, the illustrious Mister Moony?"

Sirius scowled before spitting out a one-word answer. "America."

James's eyebrows shot up. "Really? How did *that* one happen?"

"Long story, Prongs." Sirius sat down on the chair behind him—the only piece of intact furniture left after last June and braced himself.

"Last school year—the Prongslet's Third Year—Dumbledore hired Moony as the Defense teacher."

Lily winced. "The curse still intact on the position?"

"Unfortunately. At the end of the year, Dumbledore hadn't realized that I was in fact, *not* a raving murderous lunatic, thanks to the efforts of one *Severus Snape*," He spat out the name with contempt mirrored in Prongs's face, while Lily's was decidedly blank. "As a result, it was assumed that Moony had helped me escape, and lost the job, while Dumbledore went a step further and made sure everyone in Britain knew *exactly* why he had lost the job. Snivellus outing him as a werewolf to Slytherin certainly didn't help." He added bitterly.
"That fucking son of a bitch—" James swore, face taut with anger. "I'm going to kill him—"

"Not that I don't agree, Potter, but unless he's changed greatly since I last saw him, it was most likely almost certainly considered payback for the Incident from Sixth Year," Lily interrupted coolly. Both men winced, and Sirius felt a wave of shame crash over him. Despite what Snape was now, it had still been attempted murder, and not justified at all—then, anyway. The means he'd attempted in all of his idiocy certainly never were.

They had still been teenagers, and he had been a selfish git; Godric knows Remus would never have recovered.

However, he would certainly have no regrets feeding Snape to a werewolf now, he mused before discarding the grisly line of thought and took up the thread of his story once more.

"As always, you're probably right, Lily. But back to the more recent incident: In June, I finally managed to get my hands on Pettigrew, and might have ended up bringing Charlotte along for the ride."

"Sirius—"

"She wasn't hurt, Evans, not by me," he quickly countered. "Turns out, she befriended Alice and Frank's son Neville, as well as a Muggle-born witch by the name of Hermione Granger—very bright, reminds me of you in fact; very protective."

Lily harrumphed at this, but said nothing else.

"So, long story short, I was arrested again," Sirius continued. "Almost got romanced by a Dementor, while Miss Granger and the Prongslet ended up breaking me out via Hippogriff—"

"Hippogriff! Padfoot, what, how in the name of Merlin did she—" James exclaimed in shock.

"No idea, Prongs, but I suspect Hagrid was keeping one, and I know she's taking Care of Magical Creatures. Anyway, I barely got out of Hogwarts—and the country, for that matter—and I've kept in contact with her ever since."

Lily shook her head in disbelief. "Only you, Black. Only you."

Sirius grinned at her reaction. "Only me, Evans—"

"Potter."

"'Course, Evans. But speaking of Potters, I have a question for you two: How did Charley-girl take all—this?" he questioned, gesturing broadly to James and Lily.

"About as well as can be expected, far as I can tell," James responded with deliberate nonchalance, "She believes us, and I intend to disembowel Dursley at the first chance. She's outside, with a rather odd Third Year, if you want to see her."

"If I want to? Last I checked, she is my goddaughter, as well as a witness to my all-important trial," Sirius replied, standing up. "And Prongsy, I'm hurt at your memory: I've told you that you're not allowed to disembowel anyone without me."

James chuckled, and only laughed harder as Lily rolled her eyes, muttering, "I swear I married three people," as they all moved to the door.
"Shall we?"

"With pleasure, Prongs. With pleasure."

"Sirius!" After emerging from beneath the Whomping Willow, the first impression Sirius had was of a small teenage-shaped projectile. The second was of the rare sight of sunlight in the Scottish Highlands, and a rather vacant-eyed blonde with colorful glasses who stood a meter or so in front of them.

"Long time no see, Potter Junior—did you miss me?" he teased. His goddaughter grinned.

"What d'you think? Got my letters, I see. Did you owl Remus?" At her query, he simply nodded as she stepped back and called to the blonde, whose name, appropriately enough, was Luna, before turning back to them.

"Thank you for waiting with her, Luna," Lily called as she and James emerged from under the Willow.

"Oh, it was no trouble at all," Luna replied dreamily, "There wasn't even a Basilisk this time, like with poor Ronald and Ginny, and Charley's always an excellent partner in finding Weetimorousbeastie trails, though I do think I saw a Bibbering Humdinger go by earlier."

Charlotte grinned at her friend's—eccentricity as the two began to walk back to the castle, his goddaughter worriedly glancing back at the frozen adults, but it barely registered with the Animagus, whose mind was still caught on basilisk.

Did she just mention Charlotte and a bloody Basilisk in the same breath? As in the fucking-huge-snake-capable-of-killing-you-by-looking-at-you-Basilisk?

"Did she just mention a . . .Basilisk?" Prongs said slowly, stuttering as the color drained from his face and he glanced to his similarly shocked wife and best friend, before running after his oblivious daughter. "Charlotte!"
"It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."

-Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes

It had been a quiet morning, and what should have tipped her off in the first place. Charlotte had woken up, and for the first time since Halloween night, she was able to dress, shower, attempt to tame her hair, and go to the Great Hall without sullen glares from her year-mates, hexes in the hallways, or really, any human interaction before her first cup of coffee.

The hallways, as usual for a Tuesday morning, were deserted but for the occasional prefect patrol—easily avoided with the Marauders’ Map—and all in all, perfectly ordinary, if a little emptier than normal.

It was rather wonderful, if she was being honest. A little odd, though.

However, she would have to have been quite stupid to miss how the Great Hall silenced at her entrance, the sheer amount of worry on Neville and Hermione's faces when they promptly sprang up to drag her back out to the entrance hall.

"What—" Charlotte began to ask before Neville cut her off.

"Here." Neville said tersely as he shoved The Daily Prophet, of all things, into her hand.

"But—"

"Just read." Hermione implored, her face tense. Charlotte huffed as she took a look at the paper, and immediately felt all the color drain from her face when she read the headline.

"What?"

MIRACLE IN GODRIC’S HOLLOW?

By Daily Prophet Reporter Rita Skeeter

At the headline—accompanied with an old picture of her parents and godfather at their wedding—Charey was spluttering with anger.

"That cow—how did she know, it's barely been a week—"
"It g-gets worse," Neville stuttered out, his voice at a volume Charey hadn't heard from him since Second Year. "Turn to the third page."

Behind her glasses, the black-haired Gryffindor raised her eyebrows incredulously—if she remembered correctly, that was normally Skeeter's gossip column—before opening the newspaper with a soft rustle.

For a moment, Charlotte could hardly breathe at the sight that greeted her.

"What —"

"Read it." Her friends demanded in unison. Charlotte stared at them a moment longer, before she began to read, jaw gradually dropping in disbelief and no small amount of horror.

**GIRL-WHO-LIVED AND TRI-WIZARD CHAMPION, ABUSED?**

*By Daily Prophet Gossip Correspondent Rita Skeeter*

Charlotte James Potter, age twelve, the Girl-Who-Lived, Tri-Wizard Champion, and Heir to a House of the Sacred Twenty-Eight.

Loved, self-assured bordering on arrogant, and hardly a care in the world—well, that's what the Wizarding public, myself included, believed for years. The truth, though, is far more terrible than any of us could have ever imagined: ever since You-Know-Who's defeat, Charlotte Potter has been raised and abused by Muggles.

Readers, you just read that right. The person responsible for the death of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has not been raised in a loving, magical environment, as we all justifiably assumed, but by a set of stupid Muggles set on destroying one of our own. It is one of the best-kept secrets of our time, but after extensive research conducted, the truth can finally be thrust into the light.

It is a complex story, with a wide, often publicly respected cast, and devastating implications. To begin, go back thirteen years ago, to Halloween night, 1981. You-Know-Who had at last been killed, fallen apparently at the hands of a babe. With Death Eaters still roaming free—and Frank and Alice Longbottom to be shortly after tortured to insanity by the Lestranges in addition to the arrest of traitorous mass murderer Sirius Black—it was mass chaos. In the storm, one man was able to take a mere child, apparently believing he knew what was best: Albus Dumbledore.

Instead of giving her to a proper loving, family, such as the House of Malfoy, or into the care of a respected witch with familial connections such as Lady Augusta Longbottom, the Chief Warlock, widely respected for his leadership during the War, chose to drop her off on the door step of her Muggle relatives on a cold November night, with only a letter to try and explain one of the greatest miracles of our time.

And it didn't end there, readers. Two days ago, on the suspicions and worry of both myself and that of one who shall remain nameless, I paid a visit to Charlotte Potter's Muggle family, at Number 6 Private Road, the Dunderheads. What I found there shocked and disgusted me. To begin with, there was none of the protection one would expect; no wizard neighbors and no wards. There was no wizard or witch there, save for a Squib by the name of Alexandra Fisher, who proved to be quite senile upon being interviewed. Upon further discreet investigation with Muggle neighbors, the abuse became clear.

Rarely did someone recognize the name Charlotte James Potter as that of a neighbor—a name every magical child in our world grows up knowing—and then, it was only to mention stories that
painted a dark picture: a young, fragile orphan, left alone by her parents, bullied and continually put down by her ignorant aunt, uncle, and cousin—

"I can't." Charlotte threw the paper down, looking pleadingly at her friends, her back braced against the wall. There in the Great Hall, Charlotte began to feel an increasing sense of vertigo, as if she were in free-fall, with nothing to catch her, and single sentence playing through her head on a loop:

They knew. Everyone fucking knew everything.

"Please tell me she doesn't say anything else," Charlotte pleaded.

"There's more," Hermione supplied grimly. "Skeeter goes on to imply that Dumbledore's either a manipulative old coot or that he's lost his marbles—"

"Not sure she's far off the mark, there." Charlotte muttered bitterly.

"—that you're a traumatized, fragile child with basically no chance in the Tournament, and that Lucius Malfoy is the hero of the hour, quoting him as being worried for your welfare in addition to waxing on about the suspicious nature of the returned, and it really is quite obvious that he was the one who tipped Skeeter off in the first place."

Charlotte slide down to the ground, her head in her hands. So much for peace. Now, she had this insanity to deal with.

Through her fingers, she finally asked the first of so many questions rattling through her head, even as her she felt her heart racing in her ears.

"How the hell does Malfoy know where I live?"

Neville shrugged, and kneeled down beside her, carefully sliding an arm around her shoulders. "J-Just breathe, Char. It's going to be al—"

"Don't you dare say it's going to be alright, Nev," she said fiercely, selfishly leaning into the physical contact. "I know how this story goes."

For a minute, he didn't respond; when he did, it was only to address her original question.

"For him, the address wouldn't be that hard to find; I-I think it's listed in the student register. But I d-doubt he did—too much dirty work. Skeeter's k-known for being to dig up just about anything on anyone—a Muggle address would be easy. And when she doesn't have anything, she creates gossip."

"It's not the point, anyway," Hermione said briskly, and bent over to pick up The Daily Prophet, eyes already beginning to gleam with ideas. "And Skeeter may be a dirty skag who was paid to make up ridiculous things about you, but—"

Abruptly, she paused, before grabbing Charlotte's and Neville's arms and forcibly dragging them up and into an alcove as they stumbled along, further away from the Great Hall. Once hidden from casual passerby, she faced her two friends.

"Better?" Charlotte asked wryly, even as she craned her neck to check for anyone attempting to listen in.

"Much," Hermione affirmed, before continuing. "As I was saying, Skeeter may have been paid to make up gossip, but quite a bit of it is true, particularly concerning your parents and your, um,
situation."

"Try all of it," Charlotte corrected her. Charlotte remembered the fight the summer before Second Year with the Grangers all too well, as well as how her parents had just about lost it at the concept that Hogwarts wasn't perfectly safe—honestly, she understood the whole panic over the Basilisk, but it was dead. No need to worry anymore—the other day while coming back from the Whomping Willow to a rather awkward re-introduction between Sirius and Dumbledore.

Charlotte had loved every second of it.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Are you or are you not fourteen years old?"

"That's nitpicking." she complained.

"But true." Hermione's tone was palpably smug. Charlotte rolled her eyes fondly.

"Back to the main point," Neville nervously interjected. "Skeeter was paid-by someone, probably Malfoy to reveal all of this. The entire school knows about—this. All of it."

"He's got a point, Charley," Hermione agreed. "There really couldn't have been a more horrific way for this to come out to Hogwarts—with international guests, no less."

"Forget the school, what about the rest of the world?" Charlotte retorted. "It can't be any worse than Second Year here. Everyone here already thinks I'm an attention-seeking prat; besides, a ton of people won't even take this seriously. What about the whole the-Potters-aren't-dead thing?"

Hermione hummed contemplatively in response, while Neville remained silent for a moment, clearly thinking something through.

"Well, at least your parents already know about the Dursleys, right?" Neville asked, clearly expecting an affirmative from Charlotte.

Instead, she felt all the blood drain from her face. Oh God. Her parents.

Neville stopped when he saw her face. "You didn't tell them."

Charlotte began shaking her head, a sick feeling forming in the pit of her stomach. "It—It never came up before they had to go, and it wasn't really important at the time."

"Not important?" Hermione shrieked. "How is you being treated like, like that, not impor—"

"Miss Potter!"

Charlotte fought the urge to groan. And that would be Professor McGonagall. Because this wasn't already enough of a shitstorm.

The Transfiguration Professor rapidly approached the trio, her face white and furious, with an apologetic-looking Headmaster—who was wearing some truly disturbing purple robes today—in tow. Charlotte unconsciously clenched her jaw and straightened her spine in response, and began to walk forward to meet them, Hermione and Neville flanking her.

"Professor McGonagall," Charlotte returned. One second passed, and another, before she spit out, "Headmaster."

"Miss Potter, we need to talk, in my office," Dumbledore appeared almost. . .guilty? "Sadly, Miss Granger and Mister Longbottom must sit this one out. I am sure you understand, seeing as the matter
at hand is...quite delicate."

A quick glance to Hermione and Neville told the dark-haired Gryffindor all she needed to know.

"Professor, anything you tell me I'll just tell Neville and Hermione. You may as well spare us the time, and tell all three of us at once."

At this, Professor McGonagall gave a long-suffering sigh. "They are right, Albus. And whatever you don't tell them they'll just figure out for themselves, and in the process uncover yet another plot from You-Know-Who coming to fruition that you have yet again failed to stop."

At the thinly veiled rebuke, Dumbledore's lips thinned, but he said nothing as the Transfiguration Professor escorted the Fourth Years to his office.

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"I told you, Albus. All those years ago, when she was but a bairn, I told you what kind of people those Muggles were. But no, you said you knew best, and I believed you."

The frost coating Professor McGonagall's words left Charlotte more than a little shocked, as she sat in Dumbledore's office between Hermione and Neville; in four years at Hogwarts, she had never seen McGonagall lose her temper, with the exception of exasperation where Fred and George were concerned. Moreover, Professor McGonagall was losing her temper over her. She was scolding Albus Dumbledore like he was a First Year because of Charlotte.

"My dear Minerva, you have to understand, there were extenuating circumstances—"

"No, Albus. There is no excuse for leaving her with those people and not checking on her in over a decade. None."

"I am aware now," Dumbledore said, irritation showing for the first time. "At the time, however, I had no reason to think that Petunia would treat Miss Potter as anything other than the family she was. She was her niece, and Petunia had a son nearly the same age. It was not an unreasonable assumption."

Professor McGonagall remained icily unimpressed. "Blood is no guarantee of affection, Albus. You, all of people, should know that."

With the last parting shot, Professor McGonagall turned her back to Dumbledore, her demeanor softening as she gazed at Charlotte, Neville, and Hermione.

"Twenty points to Gryffindor for enormous strength of character, Miss Potter. And please know that I am sorry for allowing...this," Professor McGonagall spat out in disgust, before her face softened, a sight that left Charlotte utterly bewildered. "Would you like for me to owl your parents?"

Charlotte nodded mutely, silent as she watched her Head of House reluctantly leave. She swept out of the room, her exit punctuated by one last poisonous glare towards Dumbledore and a soft coo from Fawkes, who had been supposedly napping throughout Professor McGonagall's entire rant.

Meanwhile, the Headmaster seemed nearly ashamed of himself as he gazed at his desk, his eyes far away. Hermione, however, seemed less caring of the Professor's current state of mind, as she leaned forward with a calculating gleam in her eyes.

"Did you know?" she asked.

Dumbledore sighed from his seat, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose.
"Did I know what, Miss Granger?"

"Know that the Dursleys treated her so horrifically?"

The bearded wizard sighed, and leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers together as his eyes x-rayed the bushy-haired girl. "Miss Granger, there was no way for me to know. They are her blood family, and I not unreasonably assumed that they would treat her like one of their own; hence, I saw no reason to ever pay a visit to Privet Drive."

At this, Charlotte suppressed the urge to roll her eyes, while Hermione made a strangled noise. "No, Professor, no! You—you don't get to say that! Not after over three years of having her as a student who you saw on a semi-regular basis—for God's sake, it's your job as a teacher to investigate this!"

Abruptly, Hermione stopped, face flushed; less than a minute later, however, she began to talk again, but with an low, venomous tone seemingly designed to make the listener flinch.

"Did you know that her aunt and uncle locked her in her room the summer before Second year, and put bars over her windows? They gave her food through a cat flap. And the room they locked her in during the summer? That was a recent development. Did you know that, Professor?"

As Hermione raged, Charlotte could have sworn she heard Neville mutter, "You tell him," under his breath.

"Charley was forced to sleep in a cupboard under the stairs until she was eleven, where her best friends lived—the spiders. And her aunt and uncle call her freak, their niece who didn't know her own name until she wa—"

"The point Hermione is trying to make," Charlotte at last cut in, her heart in her throat. If she heard anymore of her childhood in such stark terms, the black-haired girl was fairly sure she'd either scream, cry, or puke. Possibly a combination of all three. "Is that I was not. . .treated on equal terms with Dudley."

"Right," Neville snorted. "And V-Voldemort only came a little bit close to taking over the Wizarding World."

"And," she stressed. "That you should have known. And you know what, Professor?"

She looked Dumbledore full in the eyes. "She is right. You should have known how Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon treated me. Bloody hell, Professor, until a couple days ago, I thought you just didn't care enough to look, or were too busy to care!"

The Headmaster looked strangely defiant at this pronouncement. "And how should I have known, Charlotte?"

With forced flippancy, Charlotte shrugged. "Asking usually does the trick. Hermione did. It. . .tends to do wonders, proving that you care, for whatever reasons, even if they're bad ones."

And oh, had she. Charlotte remembered quite vividly how the summer before Second Year, after weeks of no letters, Hermione had shown up out of the blue with her parents, nearly dragging her out of Privet Drive, practically crackling with rage after meeting Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon.

After a week of staying at the Grangers, she had been sat down by Mr. and Mrs. Granger, who informed her that any complaint they filed with the Social Workers seemed to vanish into thin air. Despite denying any charges of abuse at the time—she had never been seriously injured even with her cousin's bullying—they had, with grim faces mirrored in their daughter, told that they would help
Charlotte bring it to court if she ever chose to come forward.

The follow-up conversation ("I'm not abused—" "For Christ's sake, Charley, they starve you!") had been explosive, to say the least.

Small wonder Hermione had by and large lost most of her respect for authority that year; Charlotte still caught Hermione giving her a strange worried look once in a while, and wondered if Hermione would ever choose to directly bring it up again, try and further probe the situation and who was responsible for her staying with the Dursleys.

And then, in the present day, it hit Charlotte like a bucket of ice water.

Throughout this entire conversation, the Headmaster had looked saddened, grim, and defiant in turn—but never surprised, Charlotte remembered clearly, even as she closed her eyes, as if she could block out the betrayal.

Even after everything that had gone down last year, it didn't hurt any less. The Headmaster had always, to Charlotte attempted to do what was the right thing to do, even if he refused to just bloody listen, sometimes. But this? Dumbledore either hadn't cared, or had another strategy up his sleeve—most likely both, a dark part of her whispered.

Charlotte wanted to trust him so badly, to believe he would take but then she found he had gone and done something like this, yet again, and on purpose—Charlotte began to wonder if she could truly trust anyone outside her friends, sometimes. The list of teachers she trusted certainly seemed to grow shorter by the day.

"Charley? Are you okay?" Neville leaned over, his brown eyes worried as he gripped her hand.

Charlotte opened her eyes gave him a weak smile. "I'm fine, Neville."

She wondered if it sounded as unconvincing to them as it did to her.

She couldn't help but wonder if it would ever be true again.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Due to the portrayal of child abuse in this chapter: Emotional and physical neglect/abuse are extremely real, horrific events that happen to people in real life, and comes in many awful forms. Please, if yourself or anyone you know is abused or neglected, get help, talk to someone in a position to help, whatever is needed. Lastly, please feel free to tell me if you ever find an issue with the portrayal of the characters and their situations in this story, especially for this and the next chapters.
As he walked up a painfully familiar path, Remus Lupin failed to tamp down his nerves and fear. Hardly unusual, seeing as he was about to see friends he'd believed dead for over a decade, and after unforgivably failing their daughter for twelve years.

It had been, as with everything else with a hint of good to appear in his life, for one reason: Remus was the coward, always was the coward. It had been for the best. He was a werewolf; they were not. And Remus would happily die before subjecting anyone, anyone, to the chance of becoming like him.

Of course, that had blown up rather spectacularly last June. While his memories after he had transformed were rather fuzzy, Remus did remember enough to know that he had chased James's daughter and Hermione Granger halfway across the Forbidden Forest, after fighting Sirius—Sirius, for Merlin's sake.

Snape had been perfectly justified in warning his students about Remus. It was only through sheer luck no one had ever been bitten at Hogwarts during Remus's school years or his brief tenure as professor.

Though, he thought wryly as he walked up the overgrown pebbled path, perhaps warning them about Charlotte Potter would have been a better idea.

The teenager did not take well to those she perceived as hers being threatened, and he still had no idea how she hadn't been expelled after cursing a professor like that; but despite having no idea as to the why, the werewolf had a pretty good idea as to who was responsible for her continued residency at Hogwarts.

Albus Dumbledore. The same man responsible for him dealing with overly-paranoid American Aurors in the first place, no matter how justifiably. The very person who had given him an education, and had led him, Sirius, James, Lily, and everyone else all against the Darkest wizard in history. For most of Remus's own life, the elder wizard had been a personal hero, always insisting on seeing the best in Remus.

But the original point remained. As retaliation for protecting a perceived criminal—albeit supposedly while under the "cruel bonds of sentimentality"—Remus had finally found himself incapable of getting any kind of job in the British Isles, and had been forced to go across the pond, leaving Padfoot and Charley behind.
It hadn't hurt, much to leave them; it had been for the best, all things considered. But Remus had just felt...empty, as his heart were gone.

After leaving Britain, he had rarely kept in touch with either of them—her because she had a life and friends outside two vagabonds, him because he was on the run and couldn't afford the extra danger—and once in New York, Remus had fallen into the familiar routine of once again setting up a new home.

While rough at times, it had been better than in some ways than his home country ever had—hell, he had even gotten and kept a stable job—after an interesting beginning.

At the news of the arrival of a British werewolf, MACUSA's Aurors had detained him in New York, where he had been questioned by their Director, the quite frankly terrifying Annamira Graves, on several topics, particularly if he had been sent as a spy. Veritaserum had cleared that one up rather dramatic fashion, Remus remembered vividly. While America had less problems with werewolves than Britain, the suspicion was still there, and MACUSA and the British Ministry of Magic rarely got on well.

With some misunderstandings out of the way, though, they had happily offered him a job in the research division of their law enforcement department, regardless of his furry problem. But he could not say he was surprised they had taken it in stride. Emma Lazarus had not been only speaking of Muggles in her poem, after all. The Americans had an odd fondness for outcasts when it suited them, despite some of their more...backwards traditions (He still didn't understand why they rejected Earl Grey for black coffee. Coffee. Over tea.)

Besides, they had as good an appreciation for a creative idea that may have started life as a prank as anyone else. Except for Voldemort. But then, Remus wasn't surprised.

As he came to a stop at the wooden door at the end of the path, the werewolf raised his hand to knock with no small amount of trepidation. Sirius had sent him a letter detailing the supposed truth, but a larger part of him was cynical rather than hopeful. Resurrection was impossible according to every law or rule of magic ever found or written as was well known by every magical child, and Prongs and Lily just pop up out of nowhere, perfectly fine? Life, in his experience, laughed at anything approaching half that level of kindness. The odds were far more likely that this was some sort of trap; or the Dementors had finally caused Sirius to crack.

Tentatively, he began to knock on the door. After two soft taps, much to his shock, a very familiar House Elf appeared beside him on the doorstep.

"Rosey?" Remus murmured.

The Elf in question's bright green eyes bulged. "Mister Remy? Is that you, come back at last?"

Almost against his will, the Gryffindor could feel a grin trying to take over his haggard face. "Rosey, I had no idea you were still here."

To his surprise, the House Elf shook her head, her eyes watery. "Not always, Mister Remy. Af—Affe—After Master James and Missy Lily w-were killed by Snakey, we wents to the big castle. But with a Potter back, we has a duty here."

With a loud sniff, the Elf grabbed his hand and Disapparated them inside with a loud crack. Once there, it took Remus a minute to recover—the magical transportation never agreed with him right after full moon. But after recovering his equilibrium, the Gryffindor took a brief glance around, and
was shocked by what he saw.

The entrance hall, while never particularly grand in scale the first place, was now positively awe-inspiring. Both the hall and the adjoining rooms were sparkingly clean, and tastefully re-furnished, expensively so. It was comparable, in fact, to before the War, when Charlus and Dorea had still lived here.

The Oriental carpets James’s mother had loved so much covered the floor, with crystal windows letting in enough natural light to show off their intricate, flowing patterns once more; several of the slightly ostentatious bookshelves stationed around the room looked rather emptier than before, but as if James had finally weeded them as he had been threatening to do before they had been recruited by the Order, and other priorities had reared their ugly heads.

The grand blue-streaked marble fireplace Sirius had cracked his skull on after a prank gone awry—and how the secret of their Animagus forms had come out to Prongs’s parents—positively shone. It was as if Remus had never left, and Charlus would walk around the corner, gruffly asking how Remus had been with a friendly clap on the shoulder.

But, of course, Charlus and Dorea were dead. Potter Manor had burned down by Death Eaters—supposedly, by controlled Fiendfyre. But that was impossible; no one, except possibly Dumbledore, could control Fiendfyre.

Remus swallowed roughly, and dragged his mind back to the present. More grief wouldn't help him.

"Rosey," he began slowly, kneeling down to her level, fixing her with an intense stare. "Are you saying they are really alive?"

"Indeed she is, Mister Moony." A cheerful voice boomed out from behind the two.

Remus whipped around, only to find a grinning, healthy Sirius Black leaning against the wall.

"Remus, love of my life!" Sirius extended his arms to the werewolf, exuberant as always. "My dearest friend—"

"No, I'm not springing you from whatever Prongs and Lily threw at you." Remus immediately shot back reflexively.

Sirius pouted, but the expression didn't last long before a grin took its place and he fiercely embraced Remus, who briefly tensed at the sudden contact, before relaxing and returning it in equal measure.

He’d missed his best friends.

Distantly, he noted the crack signalling Rosey’s departure, but ignored it in favor of eventually leaning back to study his best friend, happy in what he saw. While Sirius’s cheekbones remained too prominent for Remus’s liking, the Animagus had color in his skin again, and wore clean clothes that fit; more than that, it was like Sirius was truly living again, Remus marveled.

No longer did the convict appear as if he were barely holding himself together through sheer force of will—or a certain teenager—from the ghosts permanently roused in Azkaban. He looked... young. Not as if he had held the weight of the world, and emerged the worse for it. More like the cocksure wizard ready to take on the world Remus remembered in the days immediately after graduation.

At a question from Sirius, Remus shook his head, attempting to clear it.
"Pardon?"

"As I was saying to your aging ears, Prongs has been working on getting me an actual trial and Mind Healer. He gets inducted tomorrow, actually." At this, Remus was skeptical.

"Isn't the fact that the demise of the Potters was greatly exaggerated still a Hogwarts state secret?" he asked curiously.

Sirius smirked. "Technically. On a side note, Dumbledore had Amy Bones—"

"Didn't she threaten to curse your hair to fall out if you ever called her that again?"

"—to call on us. And also technically, it was implied."

The graying Gryffindor snorted as the two men began to walk up the stairs, memory guiding them to what was now, Remus realized with a swallow, James's study. Merlin, I miss Charlus. James's father, while quite the traditionalist, had always indulged the Marauders—to a point.

"Nice way of describing," Remus began before raising his voice in a passable impersonation of their Hufflepuff classmate. "Sirius Orion Black, address me with that demeaning diminutive again, and I shall be forced to take drastic measures against your person. I certainly wouldn't chance it."

"Moony, my friend, you could barely look at a girl at school, let alone flirt. Anyway, Amy Bones," Sirius emphasized as he summarized the encounter while the two turned a corner, "After holding all three of us at wandpoint for a bit, got a Kingsley Shacklebolt in to check us over, and has promised to lend James her support tomorrow, after he claims his title."

"Wish I could see that," Remus commented. "Without the Headmaster and Amelia's help, you lot would either end up dead, arrested, or Kissed."

"Alas! I will yet avoid the sweet arms of a Dementor," Sirius exclaimed with cheer as they stopped in front of the study door, cherry wood gleaming. "And here we are. After you, Mister Moony."

Cautiously, Remus entered the study, only to turn around and walk out with flaming red cheeks. He quickly, quietly pulling the door closed, much to the confusion of one Sirius Black. Remus wished desperately for a Memory Charm.

"Why, Mister Moony, this shyness does not become you?" Sirius cheekily asked. "You do remember—"

"Padfoot, he's currently snogging Lily against the desk."

The canine Animagus promptly snapped his mouth shut, his expression considering.

"We're waiting." Remus said firmly, knowing the personification of trouble when he saw it. "From their point of view, they've barely been married two years; they've as much catching up to do as the rest of us."

"Yes, but I doubt fucking each other's brains—"

"Padfoot."

"Merlin's pants, fine, we'll give them five minutes, just put your wand away!"

Fifteen minutes later, Remus was trying very hard not to look too closely at the wooden desk central
to the study, or the person behind it. James, on the other hand, seemed quite intent on looking at him, hair even more mussed than Remus remembered it. *Ah, lovely. That image is never coming out.*

Unfortunately—or fortunately—Lily had left, citing a need for a shower and finally getting breakfast; apparently, the couple had been keeping strange hours, working to catch up on history missed, if the stack of newspapers and letters were anything to go by.

Finally, James broke the silence as he fiddled with his wedding ring.

"I heard that Dumbledore finally made you a professor. Defense?"

Remus swallowed. "For a time. I was—well, fired again, at the end of the year."

James nodded, hazel eyes still fixed on the werewolf.

"Er—How are you, Prongs? Besides the obvious, that is."

Sirius sighed exasperatedly from the corner behind him, but said nothing when Remus turned around with a glare, the Wolf barely rousing in the back of his head. The insufferable dog only raised his eyebrows, a *who, me?* expression on his face. Remus resisted the urge to growl like the beast in the back of his head. This was his problem, dammit, and he would fix it without interference from insufferable man-children.

Meanwhile, James only snorted. "In dire need of a drink, Mister Moony."

Oh, that was a familiar tone; he'd heard many time from his old Head of House last year regarding a trio of Third Years.

"Charlotte?" he said knowingly.

James only grimaced, standing up to approach Remus, gesturing to a seat behind him as he completed the odd little triangle. "A Basilisk, Moony. How in Merlin's name does a *twelve-year-old* manage to find that big of a fucking snake in *England*, let alone at Hogwarts? And then, she manages to kill it despite having a fang impale her arm—" Prongs broke off, and turned his head towards the window, jaw jutted out and his voice ragged.

"And did I forget to mention Voldemort was there too, trying to kill my *daughter* again, and is probably behind this whole Tournament bullshit as well, and - what do I do, Remus?"

The bespectacled man looked back at him and Sirius, and the brown-haired man felt his chest tighten at the pure anguish written across the James's face. Anguish Remus could not help but feel in turn, knowing how little he had done to fix the source of the pain. It was so, so easy to feel helpless, and wait for Sirius to step in as always.

But, well. Never let it be said Remus John Lupin could not learn from his mistakes.

"You could rely on your friends, for a start," he began softly, his chest tight. "When they offer unconditional support and apologies, take them for what they are worth in their sincerity. And let them try to fix what they've done."

James's face brightened somewhat, his eyes considering. "Mister Prongs would very happily accept that, Mister Moony—would Mister Padfoot like to second the motion?"

"Mister Padfoot would second the motion with pleasure—on the condition Messrs. Prongs and Moony never again act like such emotionally constipated gits."
"Mister Moony would like to note that Mister Padfoot's response could be neatly summarized as the pot calling the kettle black."

Sirius arched an eyebrow. "Mister Padfoot would like to note that he is really, truly, deeply wounded by Mister Moony."

"Mister Prongs moves to call bullshit."

And like that, it was as if nothing had ever happened, and they were as they had been during the war—no, it was better. Because this time, he would do better; Remus certainly would never run in the face of difficulty, or as long as those he loved still lived.

James finally getting over himself and 'fessing up to Lily certainly helped.

*Speak of the devil—*

Lily ran into the room, face pale and her eyes red-rimmed, worryingly, with *The Daily Prophet* in hand.

"Lily, what happened?" James leapt up from his seat, eyes looking the frantic witch up and down for the source of her distress. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, dear," Lily quickly dismissed, an uncharacteristic look of caution and fear crossing her face, before delivering an inquiry far more haltingly. "Ha—Have any of you seen *The Daily Prophet* today?"

"I've barely been in the country two hours," Remus said slowly, and looked to the two other men, who only shook their heads. "Did something happen?"

Lily briefly dithered before silently handing the newspaper to her husband. He promptly turned white as Sirius grabbed the paper from him; a second later, he began to swear. Remus looked questioningly at Lily.

"It's better if you see for yourself." Remus grabbed the *Prophet* from Sirius's shaking hands only to almost drop it when he saw the headline himself.

**MIRACLE IN GODRIC'S HOLLOW?**

"What—how—did Skeeter—" James began to pace, muttering under his breath about reporters and trials, yanking at his hair while Sirius snatched the newspaper back, and began to read, his face pale and taut with an icy look in his eyes. Lily only clenched her jaw as Remus stepped closer to do, unsure of his role.

"There's more, Remus," Lily muttered as they observed the two men.

"How could it get worse?" Remus responded quietly. *Everyone* knew now, and they'd have to pick Sirius's brain for the wards on 12 Grimmauld Place, now, for any semblance of privacy.

"There's an article by the same bitch; she claims to have interviewed people of Privet Drive, Surrey, attesting to. . .the abuse of Charlotte."

For a moment, all Remus could hear was white static, and the Wolf outright growling for blood in his head as he sank to his knees, head in his palms.

*This was his fault.*
"You're sure?" Remus whispered hoarsely, already knowing the truth. Suddenly, so many little details from last year made sense; the ill-fitting Muggle clothes he had seen Charley in, the protectiveness of Hermione and Neville whenever the Dursleys were brought up, Charley eagerly accepting him and Sirius's claims of knowing James, the well-practiced secrecy.

How had he not known?

Lily knelt and gently touched his shoulder. "Of the abuse—I'll find out tomorrow, I suppose. In the meantime, I'll settle for making you lot don't muck up tomorrow with your dramatics."

Remus looked up in confusion. At his face, Lily elaborated tersely. "You and James are facing the wolves tomorrow—I'm going to visit my dear sister, formally get guardianship back, and find out the truth of this."

The graying wizard raised his head. "Wait, me? Why in Merlin's name would you want me there?"

Lily smirked. "Didn't you hear? A Lord as busy as James will be in need of a proxy."

Remus shook his head, already saying the words—

"Ah, ah, ah, Lupin," Lily tutted, "You wanted to help—here's how. And before you get it into your thick skull, this is not charity. You most likely know more about the technicalities of magical law than anyone else in this room, and we need a good proxy to protect our interests. Unless something has drastically changed in the last decade, the problems we're seeking to fix run much deeper than Sirius not getting a trial; a werewolf in such a position of power—much less one as qualified as you—is only the beginning."

"Besides," Lily added with a smile, "Just imagine the face of Lucius Malfoy when you take the Oath."

Remus thought it through for a minute, taking a good twenty seconds to linger on the scene the aristocrat would present at being forced to consort with a werewolf. Really, there was only one answer he could give, and it was an easy one.

"I'll do it."

In response to his affirmation, Lily only gave him a sharp grin.

In front of the two, Sirius and James spoke in terse whispers, eyes alight with something that would have made Remus, if he were anyone else, tremble; as it was, he had to resist to the urge to give a dark, lupine smile. His family—his Pack, a corner of his mind yowled—was reunited.

After getting Remus's head screwed on straight, Lily was about to leave the room to fire-call Amelia Bones when she heard a distinctive peck from across the room. Ignoring the continued plotting of her husband and his best friend, she strode across the room to open a window to let the large Eagle Owl in. She handed off the owl to Remus, who yelped as the yellow-eyed bird bit him on the hand, while she turned over a letter addressed to her and James from Professor McGonagall, of all people.

Lily ripped the envelope open and unfolded the letter. Quickly, she scanned the letter, a sinking feeling in her stomach the entire time.

"Lily-flower?" James leaned over her shoulder, eyes curious behind his round frames.

Sighing, the redhead shifted, allowing him to read the letter at the same time.
Lily and James,

I'm writing you to talk about today's Daily Prophet headline: if you haven't seen it, I would suggest reading any article in there written by one Rita Skeeter before reading this letter any further. The entire school is in an uproar over the articles, including our international guests; it would be a good idea for you to take your daughter out of school until the Weighing of the Wands, which has been pushed off until the 20th of November. Charlotte already has half the school against her, and she, quite frankly, needs her parents now more than ever, regardless of any tournament taking place.

In the past, I already failed to prevent her being sent to her aunt and uncle, as well as keeping away from danger at school, and I can never apologize enough for that. Please know that as both your former Head of House and your friend, I will do everything in my power to help you now if you need it. But I must recommend that if you choose to take Charlotte home, please do so as soon as possible.

Hoping you are well,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Transfiguration Professor

Lily didn't even have to think about it. With Sirius, Remus, and the House Elves back, as well as the rudimentary wards of Potter Manor back up, Charlotte would be safe. Besides, anything that wanted to get at her daughter anyway was going to have to do it over her very dead body. She dropped the letter on the wooden desk, and strolled out the door as James called after her.

"Where are going, Lils?"

The witch turned around, her face resolute. "To bring our daughter home."

There was a Hell, and that was double Potions taught by Severus Snape in a bad mood, Charlotte thought grumpily.

Everyone was on edge, and any House without a snake for its mascot usually left much poorer, points-wise. Also, there was usually either explosions, crying, or challenges to duels; one memorable occasion, there had even been all three.

Today, Charlotte would have taken any of them; instead, besides a Snape determined to put Gryffindor in the red for the House Cup, she had every person in the entire bloody school alternately trying to get a rise out of Charley, or treating her as if she were made of glass. Even the Hufflepuffs had backed off, instead taking to staring at her bemusedly, unsure of what to do.

"No, not that, Char, you'll melt the cauldron—" As Hermione yanked her hand away, Charley sighed. Potions was her most hated class on a good day, and rarely something she excelled in. On a bad day? She was as bad as Goyle or Neville.

As if to prove her point, Hermione yelped five minutes later, Summoning the latest ingredient out of her hand with her wand. "Not the scales, you'll explode the cauldron, honestly—"

"Why don't you just do it for me, if I'm such a danger?" Charlotte interrupted, half sarcastic, half serious. "Seriously, if I'm this bad, why do you—"
"Cheating, Potter?" Charlotte winced as the familiar derisive tones sounded in front of her.

She looked up at Snape through her eyelashes, and noted that curiously enough, he looked as if he had swallowed a lemon as he glared at her. "Really, while you may think it admirable to attempt and emulate your dear father in every way, I can assure you that in this aspect, some form of...originality would be most welcome. Follow the rules for once in your life, and quit asking Miss Granger to hold your hand. Ten points from Gryffin—"

But before he could complete the points deduction, the greasy professor broke off, his normally sallow face white.

Searching for whatever held his interest, Charlotte began to stand up as she turned around, only to find her mother of all people standing in the doorway, her face blank. As the rest of the Slytherin and Gryffindor Fourth Years looked behind them, silence fell.

"Lily." Snape's voice, weirdly enough, sounded...choked up as he obsessively stared at the—technically—younger woman.

Thankfully for Charlotte's sanity, the redhead wasn't impressed.

"Snape."

In sharp contrast, her tone was scathing, and her gaze dismissive of him before eyes that Charlotte saw in the mirror every day shifted to her, noticeably softening.

The former Slytherin stiffened, but said nothing as her Mum walked up to where the mismatched pair stood.

"Your father and I saw the article, and I came to get you—if you want to go."

Charlotte didn't even have to think about it. Two weeks of not having to duck curses, Slytherins, and Hufflepuffs in the halls, or two weeks dealing with half of Hogwarts waging unofficial war on her?

"If you don’t mind, M-Mum." Snape flinched as Charlotte stumbled over her words, and her mother smiled kindly, and she couldn't help but feel both a feeling of victory and confusion well up simultaneously. Why would Snape care about Lily Potter, beyond making her spawn miserable?

Her mother smiled. "It's be far from trouble, sweetheart. Your father and I would always be glad to have you home."

With her rescue from Potions Hell there, Charlotte resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at Snape, and instead went to pack up her Potions kit with help from Hermione, her work already finished as usual. As she began to clean her cauldron, discarding the unfinished drought with a wave of her wand, the Gryffindor surreptitiously kept an eye on her parent and the teacher, as Snape turned on the staring class.

"Well?" The Slytherin Head barked. "Are you all such incapable simpletons that you are unable to complete a simple task? Back to work!"

Half the class flinched while the other half raised their eyebrows in interest; nonetheless, everyone became deliberately engrossed in their work, making eye contact with anything far away from the Potions master.

But as Charlotte worked with Hermione to discard any ruined ingredients—as always, there were many —she couldn't help but see from where she stood, the Potions Master, who was now facing
her mother with a pleading expression. Right, now it's beginning to get weird.

"Lily, could we please go somewhere private and ta—"

But he, much to Charlotte's satisfaction, didn't get very far, as her Mum interrupted him in a low hiss. "In what world would you ever expect me to want to talk with you—"

The black-haired Gryffindor smirked.

"Death Eater."

Her kit clattered to the floor as she looked into the similarly shocked face of Hermione, the girls' eyes wide. Death Eater?

"Lily, please—"

"No." The former Gryffindor was terse, almost verging on a growl that wouldn't have been too dissimilar from a lion's. "You made your choices long ago, I made mine. It's not my fault you pledged your allegiance to a psychopath. And it's Lady Potter to you, Death Eater."

"Lily, you have to understand—"

"Understand what? That after selling out my family to your master, you begged him to spare me, and were perfectly willing to let my husband and baby daughter die? Understand that when you went to Dumbledore, it was to save me out of some infatuation, not the family I loved, and would have died for without blinking? You're wrong, Snape. I understand all too well."

"Lily—"

"No," she said lowly, fingering her wand with her left hand, "Whatever pathetic excuse you have, I don't want to hear it. Now for once in your life, respect my wishes and do not come near me, my husband, or my daughter before hell freezes over."

There was only silence in response from Snape as she turned her back on him.

Snape. . . and her Mom?

Charlotte glanced up at Hermione as she snapped her kit shut, checking to make sure she hadn't just hallucinated. The bushy-haired girl just shook her head, flabbergasted.

"You ready to go, Charlotte?"

"Hmmm?" Belatedly, she realized she was being addressed by her mother, whose posture exuded barely contained fury. "Oh, I just need to grab a few things from the dormitory, but other than that, there's nothing," Charlotte said quickly, hoping her eavesdropping had gone unnoticed.

As the two turned to leave, Charlotte chanced one last glance at Snape, who rather looked like he had been slapped.

After a brief goodbye and extracting a promise to send homework—and gossip—from Hermione and Neville, mother and daughter quickly exited the dungeon, and within ten minutes, were standing before the gates leading out of Hogwarts.

"Come on, Charlotte," Lily—her mom leaned over, and comfortingly squeezed her shoulder. "It's time to go home."
"The law an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

-Mahatma Gandhi

"Close the doors!"

A distinctive wand of Elder was flicked at a set of grand stone doors; a low boom echoed through the chamber once they were shut. James sighed, and braced himself with the upcoming onslaught.

"The five hundred and seventy-fourth session of the Wizengamot of Albion will now come to order," Albus Dumbledore proclaimed solemnly.

With some visible reluctance, the aristocrats, proxies, and audience—including one Rita Skeeter, whom Remus had pointed out to him—all settled into their respective seats, as a toad-like woman wearing a disturbing amount of pink set a quill to taking notes beside the Prime Minister of Magic.

All sat, however, except for James Potter and Remus Lupin, who remained standing in the Visitors Gallery, meant for those with business for the Wizengamot, under Disillusionment Charms.

"Now, before we start on unfinished business, is there any witch or wizard who wishes to claim a title and seat they believe theirs?" Dumbledore asked the chamber at large.

Despite being standard procedure, this part was often considered nothing more than a hassle by most, James remembered, seeing as in nearly every case everyone knew well ahead of time who would be claiming what title, and if the claim would be deemed legitimate.

However, today it was considered anything but routine; with yesterday's bombshell of a headline, there was not a single person in the grand chamber who did not hold their breath, waiting for someone to step forward to claim a certain title.

And James had never been one to disappoint an audience. He stepped forward, discarding the Disillusionment charm.

"I, James Charlus Potter, son of Lord Charlus Potter and Lady Dorea Black, do claim the title Lord of House Potter, that which is my right through blood and by Magic!" he declared, his voice booming through the drafty room.

For a moment, James could only see gold as the Wizengamot enchantments washed over him, searching for any hint of falsehood, before fading away, leaving him feeling as if he had just finished a double Quidditch practice.
Silence reigned throughout the chamber as a heavy ring settled on his right ring finger, the Potter crest gleaming. Albus studied him briefly with an unreadable expression. James only raised an eyebrow as he looked up at the headmaster in the silence.

At this rate, Father's ghost was going to show up to hex him before he finished the ritual. Thankfully, the Lord's Ghost was only a myth. . .probably.

"Let the record show that on November 5th, 1995, James Charlus Potter took up his hereditary seat in the Wizengamot," the Chief Warlock said at last. "You have the floor, Lord Potter."

Whispers fluttered among the Visitors' Gallery. The fat woman's eyes were wide, as if she were surprised at his not dying painfully while making a claim. James resisted the urge to smirk; if they thought this was a surprise, some of the older members of the house were going to need their heirs on standby for his inaugural speech.

Hopefully, that list included Lucius Malfoy. James had never liked him or his family in school, and it had only gotten worse after he had married Narcissa Black.

"Lords, ladies, and those of undetermined gender of the Wizengamot," James began smoothly, "I would first like to thank you for the gracious welcome I have received from your number as I have come to take my title. I will have to make it my second order of business to thank every one of you appropriately."

Nervous titters echoed throughout the room while James gave them his best charming grin—the one Lily called smarmy. "But, I must sadly address more pressing matters at hand. You see, there has been a grave injustice to one of our number, one of the great lords of Magical Britain, and the crime committed is one that has gone uncorrected for far too long."

Now, he had grabbed the attention of the Minister of Magic, a man named Cornelius Fudge, who, if Amelia was to be believed, listened far too often to Lucius Malfoy and his Undersecretary. But, Amelia had reassured, him Fudge had no Death Eater sympathies or shared beliefs with Voldemort. He was, as Amelia put it, simply a little dim, and a great lover of donations from aristocrats—which very much explained the attention currently being paid to James.

Correction: he and the rest of the Wizengamot were acting as if they had never heard anything more enthralling in their lives. Dumbledore, meanwhile, was smiling, the bastard. He already knew exactly what James was going to do, and would give it away at this rate.

"This man," James continued. "Due to great prejudice and ignorance, was vilified and unjustly punished for a crime he never committed, stuck in Azkaban for year. He was not even given a chance to defend himself, as is his right. There was no trial, no formal arrest, for one of our own. But it ends today!"

As predicted, this was greeted with the token enthusiasm of the legislature, especially from the conservative bloc—both former Death Eaters and not. They could hardly allow this kind of precedent to be set, on the off chance it would one day be them caught breaking the law.

Ephraim Travers cried, "Hear hear!"

Hadrian Macmillan yelled heartily, "Of course, help the man!"

"Motion seconded!" declared Corban Yaxley.

Interesting.
"Really, Lord Yaxley?" James asked innocently, silencing the Wizengamot as he inspected the aristocrat. Apparently, Yaxley had been placed under the Imperius Curse during the War, and was now rather respected. Well, supposedly. I have scars that would suggest otherwise. "You would formally second my motion to get him a trial?"

"With all my heart," the thin man replied in a nasal tone, drawing himself up. "It is my honor to help one of our own rid himself of such an injustice."

The toad-like woman beside the Minister scribbled frantically.

"Well then," James said cheerfully. "I'll have to tell Sirius Black the good news!"

The Wizengamot exploded, and James could've sworn he heard his father cackling from the grave. He definitely heard Remus and Charlotte's startled laughter from the Visitors' Gallery.

She didn't want to do it so soon after her conversation with Snape, but Charlotte deserved it. Her daughter may never know, but Lily would be damned if she didn't find out what her sister had been thinking all these years, and possibly give Petunia a piece of her mind in the process.

Lily sighed, and knocked on the door of Number 4 Privet Drive. A moment later, her sister—looking far older than she could have imagined, with a rather pinched expression—answered the door.

Petunia gasped, before promptly slamming the door shut in Lily's face. The witch sighed, and knocked again, even as her heart sank. She had hoped that her sister would be happy to see her after all of these years, but she should have known better. Old prejudices always died hard.

"Petunia, it's Lily. We need to talk about Charlotte." Lily yelled.

For a minute, there was no sign of her sister even listening, and the redhead began to debate the ethics of using magic to force the door when the pale yellow door slowly opened again.

"Lily," Her sister was pale and her eyes dark against her face. "H-How?"

"Magic." Lily said tiredly.

If anything, Petunia paled further, and began to close the door until Lily shoved an arm in the closing gap, her face pleading.

"Tuney. We need to talk. Please."

Slowly, her Muggle sister opened the door, her dark eyes studying Lily intently. The witch had to work not to shift as her sister inspected her for any hint of a trick. For a moment, Lily even thought she saw a glimmer of joy in Tuney's eyes.

Finally, Petunia nodded curtly, her face closing off. "You wouldn't have the decency to stay dead, would you? Get inside before the neighbors see."

Lily almost sobbed with some unholy mix of relief and grief as she followed her sister inside her house silently; as she walked through the hallway, she noted with bitter amusement that the only source of dust to be found was a cupboard under the stairs—of course, if Skeeter was right, that was also where her sister had forced Charlotte to sleep—with everything else blindingly clean.

Once ensconced in a living room with rather horrid yellow-and-white striped wallpaper, Petunia escaped to the kitchen, supposedly to make tea. Lily let it go, and took the chance to study where
Charlotte had lived for thirteen years.

On the fireplace across from her were many pictures of what looked rather like a pig with a blonde wig, but who she suspected was instead her nephew. Poor lad, Vernon never did have a high opinion of diets.

Similarly, her brother-in-law was in many photos, often flanked by Petunia and their son—Duncan? Dudley, that was it—Dudley. There was a wide variety of pictures, showcasing many milestones, Lily presumed, in their lives. There was a conspicuous lack of black hair, green eyes, and round glasses in the pictures.

But before she could ponder it any further, Petunia bustled back in with a tray of genuine tea and biscuits, surprisingly enough. As she delicately sat the tray down, she spat out information rapid-fire to Lily, determinedly not looking at her.

"I'm afraid Vernon's currently at work—he just got a promotion you know, we're all very proud, it's the third since you and your husband . . ." 

"Died," Lily supplied helpfully, channeling a little bit of James. Petunia stopped, and actually looked at her for a brief moment. Lily smiled, and Petunia flinched, and went back to rambling about Vernon and Dudley, not looking at Lily.

"Well," she said sharply, "Dudley's also at Smeltings Academy, very prestigious private school, not that you would know, I imagine, not with your lot, and he's doing so well, grows more like his father by the day, we're so proud of him, always knew he would do well—"

"Did you always know my daughter would do well?" Lily asked quietly. Petunia stopped, and delivered Lily a piercing, poisonous stare along with white tea and a Bath biscuit.

"Her? How would we be expected to know that, what with her being dumped on our doorstep in the middle of the night?" Petunia demanded. "We never asked for it to happen, for you and your—husband to go and get yourselves blown up. We treated her as we saw fit—"

Lily had flinched at the mention of Halloween, but met her sister's stare as she interrupted her again. "Petunia, why did you let my daughter sleep under the stairs?"

"Hem hem."

After Dumbledore finally managed to rein in the Wizengamot, it took James a moment to realize that he had not, in fact, hallucinated the high-pitched sound when the Minister turned to the woman beside him; his secretary, James realized. Who, for some odd reason, had a little black bow on top of her head.

"Lord Potter?" she asked sweetly. "Could you please repeat yourself? You see, I must have just misheard you—you said you intended to help Sirius Black get a trial?"

The Gryffindor grinned. "Your hearing is perfectly fine, madam. I did indeed say Sirius Black was denied a trial in the days immediately following Voldemort's fall."

Most everyone in the room flinched, save Dumbledore, as James sighed. Thirteen years later, and some things never changed. Voldemort had been a man. A rather terrifying, powerful, corrupt one, with horrible taste in names, but neither Merlin or a demon.

"I'm sorry," Fudge's secretary, said with a saccharine tone, "But Sirius Black was arrested for the
murder of thirteen Muggles as well as being a supporter for You-Know-Who. His arrest and sentencing was all well within the rules."

"She is right, Lord Potter," Fudge added tiredly. "I witnessed the...horror that day, and observed his arrest myself. All of us will be better off once he is captured again."

"There," she said triumphantly, the black bow on her hand wavering ever-so-slightly. "So, I'm afraid, there really is no point, Lord Potter, to you insisting upon this tiresome farce."

"Actually," James replied thoughtfully. "There is. You see, Minister, Madam...?"

He waved his hand in Fudge's minion's general direction, who puffed up in response as she declared, "I am Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic."

"Madam Umbridge," he acknowledged with a tilt of his head, before continuing.

"I thought so the very same thing myself," James lied, "Until Amelia Bones brought up a very interesting fact when we spoke. Madam Bones, I temporarily cede the floor to you."

A row behind the Minister, a woman with steel gray hair rose, giving James a curt nod.

As she began to explain the lack of records surrounding Sirius's arrest, let alone the lack of any mention of a trial, James took the moment to admire her putting the fear of the gods into people. Two years his senior at Hogwarts, Amelia Bones had been terrifyingly competent—and the subject of several romantic overtures from Padfoot—with such a strong sense of morality that no one had been surprised when she had rejected the offer of joining the Order. She had cited her desire to join the Aurors and work solely within the law, seeing as the Order, technically, was comprised of vigilantes without any legal authorization other than the authority given to Dumbledore to create it.

The Ministry had been falling apart during the war. Half of the DMLE had been Voldemort's supporters, and the other half had either been dead, captured, or overworked to the point of collapsing. They had desperately needed backup, both in the form of people like Amelia, and people who had only been able to provide help in slightly more unorthodox ways, such as the Order. The Hufflepuff had decided her abilities were more up to par with the Aurors.

Sadly, Amelia's sense of humor hadn't been quite up to par in school when he and the rest of the Marauders had managed to enchant every 'Puff's robes to mirror the designs of the Headmaster's in his Fourth Year. The ensuing alliance and friendship with Lily had been more terrifying than Bellatrix Lestrange on a bad day.

"In short, it was a serious misconduct of the law that lead to Sirius Black being imprisoned without trial or formal charge," Amelia finished. "Minister, it is one of my greatest failures as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement that such a man could go without trial after being informally charged with such a heinous crime. To begin to make reparations, I would strongly recommend conducting his trial immediately."

The Minister, meanwhile, looked like a trapped animal, glancing between her and Lord Yaxley, who looked as if he had smelled something foul. "Are...Are you quite sure, Madam Bones, on this count?"

"I could give you the documents detailing the lack thereof concerning Sirius Black, if you like," she replied wryly. The Minister, if anything, grew even more skittish, glancing at Lucius Malfoy nervously, this time. Malfoy, much to James's delight, had the exact same expression on his face as Yaxley.
"Oh, well, I have no... no objections then, Madam Bones. But, how would you get into contact with Black?" Fudge asked nervously.

James straightened up as Amelia gestured to one of her people by a side door. This was going to be fun.

"Don't worry, Minister. We've already taken care of that. Auror Shacklebolt, bring in Sirius Black!"

"You raised my daughter in a cupboard, call her freak, actively encourage your son to bully her, and then you turn to me and claim it's justified?" Lily said incredulously. "Petunia, she's your own flesh and blood. Would it have been so hard to treat her with some semblance of decency?"

Betrayal didn't quite cover what Lily felt. Shame and a burning desire to slap her were far closer. But to see that her sister would treat Charlotte, her family, like that... James was right. Damn him.

Petunia, however, was defiant to the last, as always. "What, you think I should have cheered her on every time she used her little abilities to take Dudley's toys, turn her teacher's hair blue, shrink the clothes we give her?"

"It's accidental magic, she would have had no control over it as a child; don't lie, Petunia, you know just as well as I how it works. You should have told Charlotte what she was doing, encouraged her —"

"I am not our parents, Lily, I won't encourage that freakishness in my house!" Petunia said shrilly.

For a moment, Lily couldn't quite remember how to breathe.

"Is that what you really thought of me, Tuney?" she said softly. "All these years later, after writing your own letter to the Headmaster when we were eleven, begging him to let you come with me, always prying into my textbooks, eavesdropping on me and my friends? You consider me and mine... freaks?"

Petunia nodded stiffly, her eyes narrowed.

"You don't see it, do you? It'd be a better world without your lot and you magic," she spat, "Your kind got Mum and Dad killed, Lily—"

"You don't get pull that card, Tuney, it wasn't my fault, it was the Death Eaters—" Lily said desperately.

But her sister continued right over her. "Vernon and I thought it got you and that husband of yours killed too. Is it any wonder we tried to stamp it out in her? It was much for her own good as it was for ours, for Dudley's."

Lily shook her head, laughing bitterly. "That's not how magic works, Petunia. Magic's a beautiful thing, and not something you can just get rid of in a child. One would think you know that—"

"I know how it works," Petunia hissed, her tone poisonous. "I watched it kill my family, I watched it terrify my husband and son—"

"Your husband and son? Terrified?" Lily repeated incredulously. "Your husband treated my daughter like a slave for over a decade. Your son and his little friends relentlessly bullied and
belittled her and made her life *hell*. I watched my daughter flinch when I said her name. Don't you dare speak to me of terror, Petunia. It may have been mostly Vernon, but—"

Petunia laughed bitterly. "Vernon? Vernon had nothing to do with any of this, Lily. I told him what the little witch was, and stopped him and Dudley from trying to love a little freak like that. I knew better."

Lily was not going to cry. Lily was not going to cry in front of the woman who used to be her sister, damn it.

"I should have listened to James," Lily said bleakly, "I told him he was a fool, that there was no way you would treat my child—*your niece*—so horrifically. I should have listened."

Petunia only looked at her defiantly, and Lily, for one rage-filled moment, hoped Petunia would one day hurt as Lily had, but at the hands of Muggles, and learn that magic did not determine the freaks of the world. People did that.

"You deprived my daughter the chance to have a happy childhood after losing her parents," Lily said viciously, "Forcing her to fit your *perfect* family. Well, *Mrs. Dursley*, I have an interesting tidbit for you. Your perfect is the rest of the world's *freakish*."

The red-haired younger woman suddenly thrust the documents at her Muggle sister. "Sign them. We get legal custody of Charlotte back, and you never have to see one of 'our lot' again."

Petunia took a pen from the coffee table, and worked through the documents in silence with a vicious efficiency. Once finished, Lily carefully shuffled them, and put them in her bag.

"There," the bitter-looking woman huffed. "Please don't come back again."

Lily didn't bother to dignify it with a response, instead silently standing up and walking towards the door.

But before she stepped out, the witch paused, determined to get one very important thing clear with Petunia Dursley.

"And for the record—" Lily turned around to face the Muggle woman one last time, no longer looking for the sister she had loved so much.

"Trying to stamp out Charlotte's magic? If that had worked, you and your *normal* family would have been arrested by your *normal* police for murder."

The witch Disapparated from the Dursleys' doorstep, leaving a woman who suddenly looked far older than the truth.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Oh, my God. You guys, YOU GUYS. I love all of you so much.

This fic, as of April 1, 2018, has hit TWO HUNDRED kudos, and over FOUR FREAKING THOUSAND HITS. I never, ever thought my first fic, would get here, or with readers as awesome as all of you. :D
"Karma is the universal law of cause and effect. You reap what you sow. You get what you earn. You are what you eat. If you give love, you get love. Revenge returns itself upon the avenger."

-Mary Browne

"Please state your name and age for the record."

As the Auror began to question her godfather, Charlotte smiled from her seat in the gallery beside Professor Lupin. Finally, she would see Sirius have his justice.

"Sirius Orion Black, and thirty five years," her godfather responded blankly, the Veritaserum taking over.

Beside him, Auror Shacklebolt stood at the ready along with a Healer, in case something should go wrong one way or another. But short of an outside attack—or the Minister saying something—Charlotte doubted anything would happen. When Madam Bones had called for him, he had thrown the Fourth Year a reassuring grin as he positively strutted into the Wizengamot's chamber at wandpoint. She herself had been sitting in the Gallery with Remus Lupin since the morning, when she, her father, her godfather, and her old professor had arrived at the Ministry with Madam Amelia Bones.

"Where were you the night of October 31, 1981?" the Auror demanded. He looked rather like an aging lion, to Charlotte, with a graying mane of yellow hair, and air of resigned defense.

"I was several places, Auror." At Sirius's non-answer response—still in the dull tone signifying the Veritaserum at work—Professor Lupin shook his head resignedly beside her, muttering, "Even under a Truth Potion. . ."

"Where were you originally, and where did you go from there?" the interrogator clarified. Sirius began to speak in a flat, emotionless voice.

"I originally went to the hiding place of Peter Pettigrew to check on him in the evening. When he wasn't there, I Apparated to Godric's Hollow—"

"Why were you looking in on Pettigrew?" the Auror interrupted. Charlotte and Professor Lupin both tensed at the extremely loaded question. "You were the Secret Keeper for the Potters, were you not?"

The Fourth Year could have sworn she saw the briefest hint of smirk cross her godfather's face.

"No. Peter Pettigrew was the Secret Keeper."
Pandemonium reigned once more in the Wizengamot as everyone attempted to put their two cents in on the veracity of his testimony.

Meanwhile, Charlotte turned to the wizard beside her while Dumbledore struggled to regain order. "What now, Professor Lupin?"

He shook his head, his amber eyes locked on the man below. "Now, we let Amelia Bones take the reins. And I've told you, I'm not your professor anymore, Charley. You don't have to call me Professor."

She gave him a lopsided grin. "Moony, then. I think it'd be a bit weird to call you Remus."

Prof—*Moony* let out a surprised, hoarse laugh. "I'm afraid I can't disagree with you there, Prongslet."

The pair shared a brief conspiratorial smile before a loud bang echoed through the chamber, causing Charlotte to almost jump out of her skin.

"Now, if you are all quite finished," Professor Dumbledore stated quietly, his—truth be told, rather odd looking, what _were_ those bumps anyway—wand in his hand. "Young Black here, I believe, is not finished with his testimony. Auror...?"

The interrogator supplied, "Rufus Scrimgeour, Chief Warlock."

Dumbledore inclined his head. "Auror Scrimgeour, please continue with the interrogation."

The silence was positively deafening, with not even the scratching of Skeeter's quill punctuating the silence as Scrimgeour turned his attention back to the Animagus.

"Mister Black," he began sternly. "Please clarify your previous statement of who the Potters' Secret Keeper was."

"I was not the Secret Keeper for James and Lily," Sirius informed him dully. "Pettigrew insisted on taking it on, while I acted as a decoy. On October thirty-first nineteen eighty-one, he betrayed them to Voldemort, whom he had taken the Dark Mark for."

Predictably, most people in the room flinched. However, Scrimgeour, much to Charlotte's curiosity, did not, only rolling his eyes at the reaction. He didn't quite seem to know what to do, though, with the answer given. "Mister Black... you refer to Pettigrew in the present tense. Did you really kill him?"

"No, I tried to kill him," Sirius corrected. "He escaped by causing an explosion, then biting off a finger to fake his death before transforming into a rat."

Thankfully, everyone seemed far too engrossed in the story being revealed to cause yet another uproar. Lord Malfoy, though, Charlotte noticed, seemed to be plotting a quick exit, sharing a quick glance with several of his neighbors as well as his wife.

"Transformed?" Scrimgeour questioned. "Don't you mean Transfigured?"

"No. Peter Pettigrew is an Animagus."

At this, Charlotte paled and looked to her father, the next question clear.

"Do _you_ have an Animagus form, Mister Black?" The ex-convict paled at this, his struggle obvious even from afar. Beside her, Moony was studying him, his face tense.
Finally, the Veritaserum won, and Sirius replied dully, "Yes, I have an Animagus form."

Charlotte bit her lip, worried for the possible consequences. She looked to the werewolf beside her, who seemed less worried. At her worried glance, Lupin explained, "He'll probably get a hefty fine for not registering, but as long as there isn't a suspicion of him committing any other crimes other than breaking out of prison, Sirius will be fine."

"Are you sure?" she asked. Lupin nodded. "Positive."

Fortunately, the rest of the questioning proceeded in a relatively predictable manner after that.

Sirius managed to keep Prongs and Moony out of it, and within the hour, he had effectively summarized her entire Third Year from an outsider's point of view. Once completed, the Healer beside Shacklebolt administered the cure to nullify the effects of Veritaserum to Sirius, while Dumbledore gave the verdict.

"Thank you, Sirius," Dumbledore said heavily, something resembling guilt coloring his voice. "As Chief Warlock, it is my duty and mine alone to make decisions regarding miscarriages of justice by the Ministry. That having been said, this is one of the most egregious cases that I have seen in a long, long, time."

The Minister and his Undersecretary were looking rather uncomfortable at this, Charlotte noted with no small mount of glee. She knew, thanks to Hermione, that Fudge hadn't been Minister of Magic at the time, but for thirteen years to go by until Sirius got a trial wouldn't look good for Fudge's administration.

"Therefore," the Headmaster continued. "I do decree that due to the full and complete testimony given by Sirius Black while under the influence of Veritaserum, as well as the improper legal procedures enacted in nineteen eighty-one, his criminal record is to be wiped clean, barring his first week spent in Azkaban, which will be labeled as punishment served for not registering as an Animagus. There will be no fine."

"I trust," he added, with a familiar twinkle in his eye. "That you will register your form within the next month, Mister Black."

"I have no intention of doing otherwise, Chief Warlock." Sirius answered, his face solemn, and seemingly calm. Charlotte could tell even from her vantage point, however, that his knuckles were white as he gripped the armrests of his chair.

"Then," Dumbledore continued. "There is the matter of fiscal reparations."

All of the color drained from Fudge's face, but he said nothing. His Undersecretary, however, had plenty.

"Excuse me, Chief Warlock," she interrupted in that same saccharine tone from before. "Do you really think that is appropriate to make reparations to such a man? We—that is, the Ministry—did the best we could at the time, after all. If anything, Black is still at fault for pursuing a dangerous criminal as a vigilante, indirectly causing damage to us and obstructing justice."

"On the contrary, Madam Umbridge," the old man replied smoothly. "I think it is most appropriate, particularly considering he was an Auror at the time, fully authorized in the war to make arrests of proven Death Eaters as he saw fit during wartime. I rather feel Peter Pettigrew fits the bill, don't you?"

He didn't bother waiting for a response from the pink-clad woman before continuing, "And to that
end, the Ministry will pay for every minute of Sirius Black's government-mandated appointments with a qualified Mind Healer, as well as six-sevenths of what his salary as an Auror for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement would have been, had he not been arrested."

Beside her, Remus suddenly choked. "Merlin's beard, but that would be... almost six hundred thousand Galleons."

Judging from the look on Fudge's face, he'd arrived at a similar conclusion.

"Thank you, Chief Warlock," Sirius's tone was sincere, before he allowed a rather scary-looking grin to creep onto his face. "Minister."

He was quickly escorted out into the Visitors' Gallery, flopping himself down on the empty seat beside Charlotte with firm clasp of the shoulder for her and a raise of the eyebrow for Remus. Dumbledore then turned his attention back to her father.

"Lord Potter, is there anything else you wish to do before ceding the floor?" Dumbledore asked warily.

"Just one more small deed, Chief Warlock," her father replied innocently. "In the days to come, I will be a very busy man. As such it is only appropriate that I appoint a proxy for myself to carry out my votes and day-to-day duties in the Wizengamot, as is my right. To that end, I appoint Remus John Lupin."

Remus Lupin stepped forward. "I readily accept my duty as your proxy, Lord Potter."

A fine gold mist briefly covered him before dissolving, while Charlotte smirked; Rita Skeeter turned pale and nearly every aristocrat in the Wizengamot looked nauseous at the idea of dealing with a werewolf.

Serves them right, for all of their prejudice, she thought vindictively.

After he was officially sworn in and seated beside her father, things settled down into a pattern Charlotte found rather boring, particularly in contrast to the previous drama. Once her father permanently ceded the floor, Dumbledore turned the attention of the court back to their normal business, even as people craned their necks in a fashion not unlike Aunt Petunia in attempts to see the Marauders—especially after Sirius claimed the mantle of Lord Black. Sadly, it was the last interesting part of the entire meeting for Charley.

While the Hogwarts Headmaster droned on about legislation involving taxation of something or another, Charlotte began to zone out, her reason for being there having been safely exonerated and sitting right next her—and enjoying the discomfort of essentially everyone around them fur too much—settling into a state somewhere between sleep and wakefulness.

Some time later, she jolted into full awareness, only to find her parents, Padfoot, and Remus looming over her.

"Fun's over Prongslet," Sirius said with a smile. "It's time for sleepy Fourth Years to go home."

"I'm not sleepy," Charlotte protested, even as she fought a yawn. "Taxes aren't exactly riveting, y'know."

Her Dad gave a rueful laugh. "You can say that again; I almost prefer a straight-up fight, considering how many 'reformed' lords here tried to kill me in the war."
Remus gave an exasperated sigh. "James, not in public."

"Forget being in public," Sirius retorted. "There's not enough alcohol in here for that conversation. Old Lucy and Yaxley never took their eyes off me."

Lily's eyes narrowed while Charlotte gave an involuntary snicker. "Sirius, you may have spent thirteen years in what amounts to hell on earth, but so help me, I will drag you to the help you deserve by your hair if I must. You're my daughter's godfather, not the new town drunk."

At this, the black-haired girl gave the Animagus a worried look; this did not go unnoticed by him, as he gave a far more serious response than before. "Lily, I swear that I'll go to the Mind Healer; just don't...press, too much, in the meantime."

Charlotte frowned at this, but said nothing. Probably just bad memories brought back by today.

An hour after her sis—Lily Potter left, Petunia was finally regaining her equilibrium when the doorbell rang again.

"Coming!" she called, abandoning the dishes to walk to the door, only to find a single man, almost a decade younger than herself, by the looks of it, and if Number Three's illegitimate son was anything to measure by.

"Er, you Petunia Judith Dursley of Privet Drive?" He seemed rather unclean-looking to her, with scruff, an untucked shirt, and a slightly battered clipboard couched in one arm.

On the clipboard, though, she could see were official-looking papers. She patted down her skirts, and drew herself up, giving him a strained smile.

"I am Petunia Dursley. What can I do to help?" she said warmly. Oddly, he turned rather stern at this as he stepped inside, flashing a government ID, and continued to speak in a rather loud Scottish brogue, even as Mrs. Number Three and Number Five peered out their windows, their eyes glinting with malice.

"I'm Geoffrey McGonagall with the British Association of Social Workers, and I just wanted to ask you a few questions."

Charlotte almost spat out her pumpkin juice the next morning when she saw the article in The Prophet. It was tucked in the back of the newspaper between an advertisement for Chocolate Frogs and Flourish & Blotts, but nevertheless caught her eye due to a familiar name.

**Dursley Family Arrested on Charges of Neglect**

*By Daily Prophet Muggle Correspondent Sarah Abbott*

Yesterday, at approximately 5:15 p.m, Petunia Dursley, age 34, and Vernon Dursley, age 42, were arrested on charges of neglect and abuse against their niece, who was their ward, by the Muggle group known as the British Association of Social Workers. Their son, Dudley, was taken into foster care in an unknown location; it is known, however, that he was temporarily in the care of a hospital for morbid obesity, among other maladies.

Petunia and Vernon Dursley are scheduled to appear in court on November 24th, and are expected to be found guilty, with a minimum of ten years with no chance of parole as well as being fined thirty thousand pounds (About six thousand Galleons). It is unknown whether their niece, Charlotte, will
make an appearance.

After finishing the brief article—more of a news bulletin, really—Charlotte glanced up as a harried-looking Remus Lupin walked in, making a beeline for the steaming tea pot while buried in an ancient-looking book. Amusedly, she watched as he attempted to balance out getting a cup of tea with one hand while continuing to read the tome.

"Need some help, Remus?" she asked pointedly. The werewolf startled at the question, glancing up at the student, giving a short laugh before placing his reading beside the newspaper.

"Hmm—Oh, I'm fine, Charlotte. Just attempting to multi-task."

"Good reading? Hermione gets like that sometimes. Makes for interesting mornings."

"I'll bet it does. James and Sirius had to save me from myself several times at school," Remus smiled fondly at the memories, before changing the subject. "So, what's the lesson for today?"

"Potions, then Transfiguration with Dad," Charlotte said with a groan—mostly directed at the first. She hated Potions, but at least she was pretty good at Transfiguration. "I didn't know he was so good, though; the way Snape always talked about him, you would think it was a miracle he passed any of his classes."

Remus shook his head. "Don't let that fool you. He was never a fan of organized education, but he gave your mother and I a run for our Galleons in top grades some years, and that's saying quite a bit."

Charlotte grinned. "Two hundred percent Arithmancy N.E.W.T, right?"

"Still a school record today in any subject by a wide margin—though perhaps a bit narrower by the time your friend Miss Granger is through. Or when you take your Defense and Transfiguration N.E.W.T.s, considering both Professor McGonagall and I were quite impressed last year."

"I'm not that good," she protested. "I'm pretty sure Padma, Neville, and Hermione have me beat."

"I must beg to differ with you there; your test scores in Defe—" Remus suddenly broke off when the familiar sounds of her godfather's steps echoed through the ground floor. "Excuse me, Charlotte. There's a certain Animagus I have to beat some sense into before he goes off to his therapy."

"Don't mind me, Professor," Charlotte replied cheekily. "At least I won't lose points today."

The graying Gryffindor raised an eyebrow. "Thank you—and I have notes from Dumbledore about a certain Hippogriff that would prove otherwise, Little Miss Marauder. I must say, good job on that one."

Charlotte flushed with a mix of embarrassment and pride.

"What are you up to, Sirius?"

Sirius looked up from the papers he was studying, giving Remus a serene smile that fooled no one. "I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about, Mister Moony."

Remus rolled his eyes. "Cut the nonsense, Sirius. What are you doing?"

Sirius sighed. "It's not what you think it is. It's certainly not illegal. Probably."
"Well, then what is it, then, because I would love to hear it," Remus said exasperatedly.

"Wormtail," Sirius began with a slight growl. "He knows my Animagus form, as well as Prongs's, and will doubtless have informed Monsieur Flight-From-Death by now, rendering it useless. Hence, not only are James going to take over the Wizengamot to ensure it never happens again, but I'm going to find the bastard."

Remus shook his head. "That's still hardly reason to do something could wind up with you back in Azkaban—"

"What would you want me to do, then?" Sirius then interrupted, a slightly manic look entering his eyes. "Wait around all day, like a good dog, going to my appointments every day, talking about my feelings. . .James is busy working to take over the Wizengamot, Lily's probably going to finish her Mastery in Charms with Flitwick, and both of them are doing their best to help Charlotte. And you, you have your research, Moony. I have nothing. I claimed my title, and that is it, until the Mind Healers are convinced I'm mentally stable. Dromeda still hasn't answered my letter yet about filling in for me during meetings, so until I can have her stand in for me, I can't do a thing. He betrayed us, and will be found. I'm just. . .speeding up the process a little."

"Yes, but my research that's to figure why our friends aren't dead, this is just ridiculous—" he began to argue, before he was cut off again by Padfoot.

"We all know he's going to come back soon. And I need to prepare for that just as much as the rest of you. Please, Remus," he implored. "This is all I can do right now. I need this."

Remus studied him for a long minute. On the one hand, what he was attempting was ridiculous and reckless and would probably end in some form of fire. On the other, Sirius was right. James had quietly registered himself and Sirius immediately after the trial, but with the registration in place and the rat with Voldemort—who really shouldn't even exist anymore, which was really quite worrying—the element of surprise that had come with their forms in the war was gone.

"Fine," he spit out at last. Sirius immediately brightened, before Remus raised his hand in warning. "On two condition: one, you tell James and Lily. They more than deserve to know; two, you do all of the research I think is necessary before you go rushing in for revenge. Last, you keep Andromeda in the loop. If she's going into that cesspit for you, she deserves to know everything that's going on to protect herself and her husband."

"That's three conditions, Moony. I wasn't aware you couldn't count to two."

"I wasn't aware you could," Remus snarked back.

"Moony!" Sirius said dramatically. "I'm betrayed. I thought we agreed I was the gorgeous, brainy one, remember?"

At Sirius's dramatics, Remus only fondly rolled his eyes, even as the worry for his friend refused to quite leave his mind. But before he could say anything else, he and Padfoot heard a familiar laugh from a certain eavesdropping teenager in the background.

"Eavesdropping, are you, Prongslet?" Sirius called out with no small amount of faux exasperation. "Have I taught you nothing about listening on other people's conversations?"

"Yes—to never get caught!"

Remus shared a private smile with the other wizard, and he couldn't help but feel rather foolish for all of his worry just then, in the moment. The first wave of fallout was done with, and they were all
back where they should be.

If there was a better scenario, he reflected privately as James Flooed back through the large marble fireplace, stress visibly melting away at the sight of the three of them, and Lily emerging from her own black hole of research, *I certainly haven't dreamed of it.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And so endeth Fallout! Right, with most of the immediate effects of James and Lily's resurrection dealt with, the real fun begins.
-Six Hundred Thousand Galleons: Roughly, one Galleon equals about $6.50, or £4.93, for my British readers. It's theorized an Auror would make anywhere from $40,000-$50,000, or about £28,000-£35,000.
-Geoffrey McGonagall: It is canon that Minerva McGonagall had a Muggle father. Make of that what you will. :)


November 7, 1994

Dear Neville,

As you've probably heard by now, Sirius was declared innocent at the trial yesterday. It was a bit weird, afterwards, when we went back to Potter Manor. I hadn't realized how much it weighed hurt him to not have my parents or Moony with him, or even to know that they knew he was innocent. He's so happy, Neville, and I think the Mind Healer he's seeing is really helping him. It hurts to think about what he would've been like if the trial had never happened, or failed.

Also, I think Remus and Sirius were kind of...flirting, one night, I think? There were old books and library stories involved. It was really weird, and I sort of ran out of the room. It's not as bad as my parents, though. Dad still isn't looking me in the eye after this morning; it's bad, Neville. I'm glad they're happy, but I don't want to see it!

When I'm not walking in on them snogging, and to answer your last letter, they're actually teaching me. Mum's brilliant at Charms—she was working with Flitwick before the war happened, apparently—and was helped me learn the Summoning Charm yesterday; also, she's been teaching me some stuff from Ancient Runes to help with my Arithmancy work, which she's amazing at. She and Dad are also teaching me some basic stuff about Healing, because "if you're anything like either of us, you're going to need it". I'm still not sure if it's a good thing. Moony and Padfoot just laugh whenever Mum says it while they're visiting—they're living together in a nearby town, but they come over nearly every other day, whether it's research or not.

Dad keeps telling me I'm not a lost cause at Potions, and has me doing much more theoretical work than Snape ever had us do; Transfiguration is absolutely amazing, and he's says I've a "real talent for it". I guess McGonagall was right after all, then. I'm busy, but it's helping me sleep better at night, with fewer nightmares.

Are you and Hermione getting on all right? I know I left when the rest of the school was being barking mad, and I'm so sorry you two had to deal with it. I miss both of you.

Charlotte

P.S. Thanks for sending me the Herbology homework and textbooks yesterday. No one here is really that good at Herbology unless potions are involved.
Charley,

Hermione and I are managing well enough, but Malfoy has been worse than usual; he hasn't said anything about you, yet, but I suspect he will. Dean, Seamus, Ron, and the rest in Gryffindor haven't been too bad; honestly, I'm not sure they know what to think. Everyone's convinced you entered your name somehow, and there are rumors going around it had something to do with your parents coming back, but some of us are still trying to convince them that you didn't enter your name, and I think they'll come around eventually.

It was no problem at all sending you the Herbology homework; Professor Sprout was happy to give me makeup work for you, as well as the reading. It's not quite the same without you here in classes, though, especially in Potions and Defense. Snape's been a complete nightmare, and Moody is absolutely mad, and Hermione's usually too busy trying to keep both of us on course with her notes for anything else. It's good your father's helping you with Potions, though, and that you're finally convinced about Transfiguration. You're great at it, Charley.

Gran owled me, asking if the newspapers were right, that your parents are alive. I hope you don't mind too much, but I told her that you were staying with them in Cheshire at Potter Manor until the Weighing of the Wands, four days before the First Task. You are coming back then, right? She said that she was going to start writing them, particularly concerning political matters.

It's fantastic you and your parents are getting along so well, and that Snuffles is getting better; we miss you, and I hope you come back to a nicer Hogwarts.

Best,

Neville

"Oi, Longbottom."

"Fred? George? What d'you want?"

"Oh, that hurts, Neville, old boy—"

"—Hurts right in the chest it does."

"You assume that we want something—"

"—That our selfish desires are the only reason we'd talk to you, Neville, old boy."

"Yes, I do."

"Well, it turns out, as a matter of fact—"

"—You are right, Neville, old boy."

"We do want something. Just as friends. We were wondering—"

"—If you could just tell us the whereabouts of dear Miss Potter—"

"—And we'll be on our way."
"Why do you want to know?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, Neville, old boy—"

"—We miss our occasional partner in crime—"

"—And are quite worried for her."

"It's been a rough week for her, what with her parents—"

"—Not to mention the idiots—"

"—Who have been running around. We figured we'd cheer her up."

"Fine, then. She's with her parents at her family home, Potter Manor in Cheshire, and Fred, George—"

"Yes, Neville, old boy?"

"Be kind, please."

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November 11, 1994

Dear Charley,

We're getting on fine, here. Lavender and Faye have been rather cold lately, but Parvati's been spending time with Padma, and has graduated to acknowledging that I exist again whenever we're in the dormitory. Malfoy, Parkinson, and their cronies have been as horrible as expected; Malfoy, the absolute cockroach he is, made a comment yesterday during lunch about how it had finally been proven that you were even lower than a Muggle, if they treated you so badly.

I thought Neville was going to kill him before McGonagall took eighty points off of Slytherin, and threatened to take more if he had been in her House; Snape took off another thirty, and dragged him out of the Great Hall. According to Ginny, he was given detention for two months, cleaning out the Potions supplies.

Neville's been fine, if a little strange around me lately. I don't suppose you have any idea why?

Meanwhile, everyone from Hufflepuff has had varying reactions to the news. Professor Sprout gave thirty points to Gryffindor today when Neville passed her a watering can without having to be asked, and Cedric Diggory has been very kind whenever we talk. He's surprisingly knowledgeable about a lot of things, really. Expect a very pompous apology from Ernie Macmillan when you return (When are you returning, anyway?), and Zacharias Smith is still being horrid whenever you come up, but the majority of Hufflepuff has been rather cowed since Skeeter wrote those awful articles, while staying very supportive of Cedric—there have even been badges flying around, with "Support Cedric Diggory!" emblazoned on them.

I'm glad you and your parents are getting along well, and that they're teaching you some of what you're missing; I couldn't imagine what it would be like trying to catch up after three weeks with no substitute at all. As for Sirius and Professor Lupin—Neville showed me your letter—I can't say I'm that surprised. They seemed awfully close last year, after everything was cleared up between them in the Shrieking Shack. Do you think Sirius will begin to teach you how to become an Animagus? He and your father did it their Fifth Year, after all. We're not quite that far behind.
Dear Hermione,

First—I already asked Dad about Animagi. He and Sirius became very serious about it, and said that we could begin the process, but not until the summer; Moony muttered something about it being a miracle they never got themselves killed, or wind up stuck in their Animagus shapes forever in school. But, they said yes. Until then, maybe we can look for books to help us figure out what will be involved?

Second, about Snape and Mum, I have no idea. I haven't asked her yet, and I'm not sure I want to. It looked painful and angry; when it was brought up last night how I'm pretty much completing remedial work for Potions, she got a weird look on her face. Afterwards, she spent a long time writing letters to Amelia Bones and Mary Macdonald.

Thanks for the makeup work and notes, but does Snape seriously expect me to get all of that done? Never mind, I can ask for help now. Also, you'd love the library here. Apparently, Dad's a bookworm, and it has books on everything.

I'm glad Parvati's starting to come around, but I have no idea why Neville would be acting any differently around you. You'd have to ask him.

Thanks again,

Charley

P.S. Snape took points from his own House? From Malfoy? You're joking. Snape isn't happy unless someone other than him is talking about what a waste of magic I am at Hogwarts.

"What are you teaching me today?"

"Spiders. More specifically, how to defend yourself Acromantula, considering they've been allowed to roam the Forbidden Forest the last five hundred years for some ridiculous reason."

"Your mother's just a little bit biased about spiders, Prongslet. At least you've never run into Acromantula."

"I am not biased. Spiders are evil things, and deserve to be blasted off the face of the earth. Why are you laughing, Charley?"
"Not laughing, Mum. And, um, about that, Dad."

"You ran into them, didn't you?"

"Second Year. I had to prove that Hagrid was innocent of unleashing the Basilisk."

"You don't have to sound so cheerful about it! Merlin's beard, where was Dumbledore?"

"Suspended by the Board of Governors."

"Of course it was Malfoy. Is there anything you haven't met? Dragons in your Third Year?"

"Norbert was actually in my First Year. I suppose I've never met a Chimaera. . .Dad, are you okay?"

"Your father's alright, he's just having a fit of hypocrisy. But a dragon, really, dear? Now, repeat after me: Succendam Aranea."

"Succendam Aranea. Succendam Aranea."

November 15, 1994

To the much-missed Miss Potter:

Attached to a rather ill-tempered Screech Owl are two items of of differing purposes for you. The first is an item, we attempted to smuggle to you when you were still but a tiny Firstie in the Hospital Wing. The second is something you have bemoaned a lack of before. If the second fails to keep you sufficiently entertained, we suspect the first will do just fine.

Ever at your service,

Gred and Forge Weasley, Pranksters Extraordinaire

"Prongslet, care to explain why there's an owl from Hogwarts with a toilet seat in the kitchen?"

"Most likely, it's from Arthur and Molly's twins, Fred and George. They are quite the pranksters, both of them; Minerva constantly claimed last year they were the sole reason the last of her hair had turned grey."

"Pranksters, you say?"

November 17, 1994

Dear Fred and George,

First, congratulations for finally managing to send someone a Hogwarts toilet seat. I needed the laugh. Second, where did you find a novel called The Rune at Merlin's Grave? It's a very good mystery, and written by a witch makes it very interesting.

Third, I was asked by my dad, godfather, and Remus Lupin to let them pass on several messages below; you would know them better as Prongs, Padfoot, and Moony.

Lastly—I was never tiny as a First year. We've been over this, Fred.

Charley
P.S. Messr. Prongs just wanted to congratulate Messrs. Weasley and Weasley on their great pranking success to be found at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry, and commend them on taking his heir under their wing.

P.P.S. Messr. Padfoot would like to wish similar felicitations upon Messrs. Weasley and Weasley, and to request that they strike the traitor formerly known as Wormtail from the Marauders' Map according to the instructions below.

P.P.P.S. Messr. Moony would like to thirdly wish congratulations to Messrs. Weasley and Weasley, and to recommend they look to Shelf 15, Row 7, the third red book from the left in the library if they ever wish to borrow an idea or three from their predecessors.

November 17, 1994

Charley,

It's dragons. Ronald's brother Charlie is in the country to help take care of them, and arrived yesterday; Ron figured out the First Task and told Neville last night. He was still a bit nasty about it, but he clearly doesn't want you to get hurt.

No idea on the species yet, but we—Neville, Parvati, Luna, me, and Fred and George when they're not in detention—are working on research; maybe you can see if your parents' library has any useful spells?

Hermione

Charlotte had just finished reading Hermione and was working on finishing the third of Snape's blasted research essays in her room—her room, which was large, airy, had a beautiful view facing a forest she was itching to explore, and had been meant for her—when her mother found her.

"Charley?"

"Yeah?" she asked, looking up from Magical Drafts and Potions, dropping her quill on her desk as she turned around. The red-haired woman leaned against the door frame, a slight smile on her lips.

"May I come in?"

"Of course," Charley said, surprised. Her mother's smile brightened as she moved away from the door, and sat across from Charlotte in an armchair. For a minute, neither witch spoke in the comfortable silence.

Charlotte absentmindedly fiddled with the sleeve of her red sweater—that, and the absurdly comfortable pair of navy jeans she was wearing had both been products of a wardrobe overhaul that had ended with Charlotte gleefully destroying the Muggle clothing her aunt had always insisted was "perfectly good", thanks to some magical concoction Sirius and Remus had made.

At last, her mum let out a deep breath. "I wanted to talk to you about...something, I imagine, Petunia wouldn't have discussed much with you, if at all."

Charlotte looked at her in confusion. "Which is...?"

The older woman shifted, but didn't break her gaze. "You're fourteen years old, Charley. As much James and I would like to pretend otherwise, things are changing for you know in different ways.
You're not a child anymore."

Finally it dawned on Charley, as she automatically wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Oh, God, you're giving me the Sex Talk."

Charlotte's mother laughed at this. "Not exactly."

Charlotte gave her a dubious look. At this, her mum conceded a shrug.

"I imagine by now, you know well enough the mechanics of the act," she said dryly. "I used to live in those dormitories myself, you know. What I wanted to talk to you about was how to be safe, if you chose to be with someone intimately—whatever gender you choose."

Charlotte felt a sinking sensation in her stomach, and didn't look at her mother, focusing on her sock-clad feet as she brooded fiercely on the unexpected question. How did she tell her mother how she felt—or how she didn't feel, in this case?

"Sweetheart?" her mother asked, her tone concerned, and painfully understanding. "Are you alright? If it's because you feel—"

Finally, Charlotte could stand it no longer.

"But I don't! Feel that, I mean. I, I think I like boys," Charlotte began to babble, "But I've never felt like I wanted to do that. Parvati and Lavender have talked about it, and even Hermione's joined in once in a while with questions, but I always thought it sounded weird. I thought I'd always get it someday, though, but I still haven't."

It was like Charlotte had finally broken a mental dam, and couldn't stop, and as she stuttered, "Does that mean that I'm—that I'm—ah, a—"

"No, sweetheart. Don't even think it for one moment." Lily Potter interrupted fiercely, her tone brooking no opposition on the matter. "What you're feeling is perfectly normal for you. You don't need to wake up tomorrow and have a great sexual awakening, or ever. As long you're happy, it doesn't matter."

"But what if—" Charlotte began, her tone wobbly and worried, before the older woman cut her off, leaning forward to take one of Charlotte's lax hands in a warm, comforting grip.

"It doesn't matter, sweetheart," she said firmly. "This is you we're talking about, and what you feel and believe now is all that matters. Besides, you are far from the first person to ever feel like this."

"What do you mean, other people?" Charlotte asked suspiciously. "I know that Faye Dunbar in my year likes girls, and Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernie Macmillan are annoying the rest of their year in Hufflepuff with their crushes on each other, but there's no one like me at school."

Lily Potter arched her eyebrows. "There might be no one like you at school, but there are people—both Muggles and wizards—who are like you."

"Like who?" Charlotte asked miserably. She had no clue where this conversation was going, and was, quite honestly, trying to will it to a quick close.

"There's one down the road, not too far from Holmes Chapel, who lives with an Animagus."

A second of incomprehension later, Charlotte said incredulously, "Remus Lupin?"
Her mother nodded. "You can ask him next time he visits, if you want. He's been very open about it with James and Sirius since their Sixth Year, and eventually me as well."

"Do you know when he figured it out?" Charlotte asked curiously. At this, her mother tilted her head to the side, her face thoughtful as her red locks tumbled over her shoulder.

"You would have to ask him," she said finally, "I believe he was dating... Bertram Aubrey at the time. James and Sirius hexed Aubrey into next week after he was caught cheating on Remus with Avery from Slytherin, I believe. Wankers."

"Mum," Charlotte choked out, trying not to laugh.

Lily Potter snickered, her expression turning puckish. "Sorry, dear. Aubrey was a capricious, horny teenager, and Avery was a future Death Eater who delighted in tormenting Gryffindors. Neither were particularly admirable beings, as I remember them."

Despite herself, Charlotte giggled, feeling her earlier panic and worry begin to dissipate.

At this, her mother's mischievous smile shrunk, and her green eyes were impossibly sad as she said, "The point of the story, though, is that you're not alone on this, Charley. You. Are. Not alone. Your father and I just want you happy, and everyone around you, from Neville Longbottom to Remus, feels the same. You are legitimate, Charlotte James Potter, and don't you dare for one moment believe otherwise. Do you believe me?"

Charlotte was not going to cry. She wasn't.

"Yes, Mum," she said quietly, her glasses fogging up. Her mother looked ready to cry, and Charlotte's heart clenched.

"Come here, Charley," she murmured, holding her arms out. Charlotte willingly fell into the comforting embrace; for a second, she shifted around awkwardly, unsure of where to put her arms, before settling them around her mother's shoulders.

For a long time, neither spoke, and the emotional silence was punctuated only by Charlotte's deep, choking breaths as she pressed her face against her mother's shoulder, eyes stinging.

She wasn't alone, Charlotte told herself. Not now, or ever.

And for the first time in a long while, she suspected she might just believe it.

Eventually, reluctantly, the pair disentangled themselves. Charlotte quickly wiped her glasses, and sniffled loudly. As she looked back up, she couldn't help but notice her mother's eyes looked wet.

"Do you still want to return to Hogwarts, then, tomorrow?" her mother asked quietly.

Charlotte felt her chest relax at the sentiment. She loved her mother for it all the more, but she still had to go; besides, she had missed Neville and Hermione, and letters only did so much. "I have to, for the Weighing of the Wands."

"I'll take you there tomorrow then. Dumbledore sent us a Portkey last week, and I had an errand of my own to run there, to talk with Filius."

Charlotte nodded, and gave her mother a small, real smile as she picked her discarded work for Potions back up at last.
"Tomorrow, then," she repeated, nodding to herself as her mother left. "One day."

While she was excited to go back to Hogwarts, Charlotte couldn't help but feel a strange sense of loss at leaving Potter Manor and her parents; while it had been difficult to work out how to actually act around parents—not to mention Sirius and her former professor, when they had visited—it had been...peaceful, Charlotte decided.

The 'classes' with her parents had been interesting, and it had been a heady feeling, every time either of her parents smiled at her when she walked into a room, her father had fondly tugged on her messy braid, or her mother had given her a private smile.

Knowing she had been wanted there, in their family. And now she had to leave, to go battle a bloody dragon.

As she completed the last paragraph on the uses of mother-of-pearl in potions, Charlotte had the distinct feeling she'd forgotten to tell her mother something.

"I still hate it, James. She's fourteen, and neither of us even know what the task is!"

"Lily, if I could, I wouldn't let her within the same country as that blasted tournament. But by now, you know the consequences as well as I do: if she doesn't honestly compete with the rules of the Tri-Wizard Tournament—"

"—She'll die from loss of her magic. I know."

"And both of us would rather face hungry Dementors wandless than see that happen."

"Still, I refuse to believe there's nothing we can do besides teaching her everything we can. Has Remus found anything in his research yet?"

"He fire-called me last night. He's found what might be a working theory of why we were resurrected. I lost track of it after he started talking about how a ward can have a multi-faceted purpose, but I can see if he's found anything yet tomorrow."

November 19, 1994

Neville and Hermione,

I'll probably beat this letter back to Hogwarts, but I wanted to write both of you anyway to tell you I'm coming back to school for good the day of the Weighing of the Wands.

Can't wait to see you,

Charlotte

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Chapter added to story Dec. 27, 2018. Doesn't add much to the plot, but I felt there was some more emotional beats that were missing a bit from the story that I added here.
I feel this addition makes the story a bit more realistic, considering Charlotte's education from Petunia was to stay away from boys, and that if she ever got pregnant she'd be thrown out of the house; additionally, I identify as queer, and I'd have loved to have the equivalent of Lily when I was figuring everything out.
As she stood in the entrance hall with her mother, Charlotte couldn't help but regret, just a little, agreeing to come back to Hogwarts, as she heard the voices of various people from the Great Hall. Few, if any, Charlotte suspected, would be friendly.

But, she still had to attend the Weighing of the Wands; but, it still didn't explain what she increasingly suspected was a fit of insanity which had led her to agree to come back to Hogwarts for good.

Or, possibly, she had missed Neville and Hermione enough to decide to deal with whatever came next.

But before she could ruminate any further on questionable decisions, her mother broke into her thoughts, her tone full of concern. "I'm going to talk to Filius about an apprenticeship, so I'll most likely be in the castle until the afternoon. If something happens, don't be afraid to yell."

"I'll be fine, Mum," Charlotte replied, a warm feeling rising in her chest from the sheer amount of sincere concern the redheaded witch was emanating on her behalf. "Really, what's the worst that could happen?"

The older witch gave her a look. "Sweetheart, I know your father. And how these events tend to go."

"But do you know me?" she offered in a fit of cheek, while the red-haired woman sighed, fondly muttering under her breath, "All James there. . ."

With final reassurances from her mother, Charlotte stepped into the Great Hall, only to be promptly blinded by a great flash and puff of smoke.

As she blinked her stinging eyes, and took her glasses off, rubbing them clean with her sleeve, she heard a vaguely familiar, boisterous, overly loud voice.

"Ah, and there's champion number four! See, Barty, I knew she'd show today!"

As Charlotte placed her frames back on her face, she had a brief impulse to check her glasses again to make sure she wasn't seeing things, as Ludo Bagman bounded forward, his robes more eye-watering than even the ones he had worn at the Quidditch World Cup.
"Come in, Miss Potter, come in, I promise we don't bite, today's nothing much, we're just going to have Mister Ollivander here check your wands, ensure they're in working order—the rest of the judges should be joining us in a moment, and you should just join your fellow champions over there, yep, that's the ticket—"

The Fourth Year could hardly think of any sufficient response in the face of such a verbal barrage. While she collected herself, Bagman charged on, rapidly explaining and gesturing widely to the people around him, dragging Charlotte around in his wake. She glanced helplessly to Cedric, who was standing in a corner with a sullen, but still beautiful Fleur Delacour. He only shrugged with a sympathetic look, looking resigned to his fate.

"...You remember old Barty Crouch, and of course, Garrick would have given you your wand, while the lovely Miss Rita Skeeter will be doing a small piece about us for the *Prophet.*"

Charlotte stopped dead at the sight of the blonde reporter, who merely gave the young witch a calculating look through heavily jeweled spectacles, her hair set in the same rigidly curled style from the Sirius's trial.

"Perhaps not *that* small, Ludo—" Skeeter began, her lip curling.

"No," Charlotte said.

"...and here the—eh?" Bagman broke off. "No, what, Miss Potter?"

"No," she repeated as she gave Skeeter and her photographer a baleful glare. "I refuse to be involved with her at all. Not after what she said about me and my family."

"Charlotte, darling, don't be so *sensitive—*"

"I don't recall asking you," she said angrily to Skeeter, before turning to Bagman. "Either she's gone from this, or I am."

"Miss Potter, I am afraid you cannot just *refuse* to participate in the Weighing—" Now, Dumbledore attempted to smooth things over, but Charlotte refused to listen.

"Professor, she wrote about *my life* in that paper," Charlotte replied heatedly. "She took the most scandalous aspects of something very private, outright lied about half of it, and then published it as if it were gospel truth! She insinuated I was a dark wizard, and that my parents were evil! Look, I don't want to be here, and I know most of you certainly don't want me here—"

Maxime conceded with a graceful tilt of the head to Charlotte, while Karkaroff scowled.

"—But if I have to be subjected to this entire farce, I don't want to deal with more misinformation and rumor than I have to."

The youngest Champion then turned to Dumbledore, bright green eyes meeting twinkling blue firmly.

"If she stays, I leave, Professor."

After delivering the ultimatum to the room at large, the Fourth Year noticed with no small amount of interest that Bagman had gained a considering expression, while Maxime had retained a look of keen-eyed interest at the chance of being rid of the gossip reporter. So did Karkaroff, for that matter, Charlotte observed.
Finally, Crouch intervened in the silent stand-off with a tone refusing to brook any more dissent.

"Very well, Miss Potter," Crouch said sharply. "Miss Skeeter, please remove yourself and your employee from the room."

"You may include the Hogwarts grounds, Mister Crouch," Dumbledore added, his face unreadable behind his beard, much to Charlotte's surprise.

_Huh, Dad was right. Being a Prima Donna really does work._

Skeeter pursed her blood-red lips together, before giving a curt nod and stalking out of the room under the suspicious gazes of all, her lime green coat brushing Charlotte as she went by. Her photographer followed in a similar manner, except he actually knocked Charlotte off her feet with his equipment—into the arms of the Durmstrang's Champion.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Charlotte exclaimed. Surprisingly, Krum shook his head even as he helped her right herself.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," Krum corrected in a thick Slavic accent. "He is the one which should apologize, and perhaps myself too."

Charlotte gave the other champion a small smile, even as she inwardly wondered at how his accent twisted her native tongue—his h's were hissed similar to a snake's, his th's hard; it reminded her more than a little of how different all of them were, whether it was Fleur Delacour's Veela nature, the reputation Durmstrang brought with Viktor Krum, to her own hated status as the Girl-Who-Lived.

It was rather like one of her favorite mystery novels, really. _We have the framed suspect in me, the mysterious old man in Dumbledore and Crouch, Fleur Delacour as the beautiful girl, and the foreign young man in the form of Krum, along with some home-grown competition as Cedric._

_But no butler, though. That's a right shame_, Charlotte mused.

"Hardly—without you, I would probably have fallen flat on my back. Charlotte," she added, extending her hand to him.

For a moment, he didn't respond, his gaze studying the teenager, before giving her a tilt of his head, and he took her hand. "Very good, then, Charlotte. Viktor."

At the implicit permission to call him by his first name—because really, it would have been nigh impossible for either one of them to not know who each other were—Charlotte felt a distinct warm feeling rising in her chest.

_Or maybe_, said a small voice in her head that sounded awfully like Lavender Brown, _it has something to do with the fact that famous, good-looking, Quidditch star kissed your hand instead of offering a handshake._

Charlotte firmly told the delusional voice to shut it. With excellent timing as well, considering the older wizard chose that moment to strike up a conversation.

"Have you found who entered you into this?" Krum asked unexpectedly, as the two Champions watched Fleur have her wand examined by a rather disdainful Ollivander.

Absentmindedly, Charlotte took notice of a rather large beetle sitting on the sill of the window behind the Frenchwoman, before what he said fully registered with her.
"Wait... you believe me?" she stuttered out disbelievingly. "You're just going to take my word for it? Not demand I prove myself at all?"

"Da," he said simply, before explaining as she narrowed her eyes at him. "Yes—I can... understand. . . not to want attention, and what people think of you. It is worse, I think, for me on Europe, though, than it would be for you."

"At least you don't have a giant scar on your forehead."

Viktor let out a surprised huff of laughter. "There is that, Charlotte. There is that."

"He really believed you, then?" Hermione asked wonderingly.

Charlotte nodded in affirmation as she flipped through yet another paper on magical reptiles, the current focus of her research, thanks to Ron tipping them off about the task—even if he still remained conspicuously absent from their research team.

It had barely been six hours since the Weighing of the Wands, but her friends—her wonderful, rule-breaking, friends—were already well into searching for a spell or enchantment that would help Charlotte keep herself from getting killed in the First Task; the part of the tournament not only meant to test her daring, but most likely to kill her, if history was anything to judge by. The more they looked at previous tasks, the more it seemed that only things previous Champions hadn't faced were Dementors or Lethifolds, and not for lack of trying by the wizards in charge of the competition.

If it hadn't been dragons, either creature was where Charlotte would have put her money, considering her luck.

"Viktor's been in my situation, he probably knows what it's like, having people impose their opinion of you over the reality," she said thoughtfully in response to Hermione's question, after shaking herself out of her head.

"How worldly of you, Potter." Parvati Patil snarked across from Charlotte, who snorted. Parvati had given her a mildly awkward, but genuine apology this morning, and Charlotte was glad for it; she'd missed Parvati's particular brand of sarcasm.

"You shouldn't get too high an opinion of her, Parvati," Hermione warned, her tone only half serious. "She still gave away her largest advantage to all of her opponents."

"And you shouldn't set your expectations too high," Charlotte retorted, her temper beginning to rise. She refused to apologize for telling any of them. "What was I supposed to do? Just let them walk around blind? I had no choice but to tell them. Besides, it hardly makes a difference as to whether I survive."

Neville gave a long-suffering sigh at his friends' bickering as he looked up from a pile of yellowing parchment. "She's not their best friend, Charlotte. Moreover, none of us want to see you lose or die—Karkaroff or Maxime could potentially sabotage you now, you know."

Charlotte opened her mouth to respond, but no sooner had Neville issued the admonition then a certain set of redheaded twins came rushing in, barely in front of Madam Pince's angry hiss to "Have some decorum, this is a library!"; predictably, the admonition was wasted on the two Gryffindor Sixth Years.

As was usual, Fred led the verbal barrage.
"Apologies, everyone, we ran into McGonagall, she was really in a foul mood—"

"—can't imagine why—" George chimed in breathlessly.

"Nothing to do with us, of course," they chorused, as the quartet of Charlotte, Parvati, Hermione, and Neville chuckled or rolled their eyes, depending upon personality.

"And, of course, we needed to beat some sense into our half-wit brother."

Parvati looked at them speculatively from behind a scroll she'd borrowed from her more naturally scholarly sister. "How much sense, Weasley and Weasley? Enough for him to finish pulling his head out of his arse?"

"No. Alas, ickle Ronniekins remains determined to not see beyond the end of his nose," Fred said, his light tone belying the tense set of his shoulders. "But, he did give us the letter from our dear brother Charlie. And, Professor Moody helped point us in the right direction for helping you, Charley."

"Did you get anything else, then, Fred?" Charlotte asked in a veiled attempt at changing the subject, even as she frowned at the comment about Moody, unsure of why he'd do that, or how he'd even know Fred and George were helping her. The Sixth Years, meanwhile happily expounded on the help Moody had given them, unloading their bags with tomes that looked suspiciously similar to some that she had seen in the Restricted Section.

Which she had never, ever, been in, of course. Ever. Despite what Certain Professors would say.

"One day, I hope you show seriously tell me how to tell them apart," Neville muttered from her right. "I still can't see it; their speaking makes me dizzy."

Charlotte looked at him sympathetically, before muttering to him, an eye on the oblivious twins, "Fred normally speaks first and more often. Also, George slouches pretty badly. Most of the time."

Neville cast a doubtful look in her direction, but said nothing more as they all fell silent, engrossed in their various books. The hush of the library was punctuated only by the occasional rustle of papers as they—mostly Hermione and George, whose books were on spellwork used by dragon keepers—took notes.

Some time later, as Charlotte was wading her way through dense records of various dragon species in captivity and their abilities, Parvati at last broke the quiet, her black eyebrows furrowed as she spoke.

"Here's something that looks promising; in the eighth century, someone in the Ukraine decided to try and raise Ironbellies as pets—he lasted somewhere from twelve months to four years."

"Was he eaten or incinerated?"

"Charley!" Hermione scolded.

"What?" Charlotte shrugged at her friend's admonition. "Contrary to what Hagrid thinks, dragons are not exactly known for being cuddly. Anyway, what does that have to do with the task?"

Parvati sighed, leaning across the table to give her a look at the pages. "He was a Parselmouth, Charley."

It took a moment for the pieces to come together for the black-haired witch before she stared at
Parvati in horror. "Please for the love of Merlin don't tell me there's some whole branch of magic having to do with Parseltongue that I have to learn in four days."

This time, Hermione gave an exasperated sigh. "No—honestly, where did you get that idea? What would they call it, Parselmagic? Dragons are reptiles, Charlotte, and close cousins to snakes—particularly magical ones, like a Basilisk."

Beside her, Neville gasped in comprehension at the same moment the Knut dropped for Charlotte. "Oh...you mean, I can literally ask for whatever I need, and as long as the dragon isn't too mad or trigger-happy, I won't get incinerated?"

Hermione nodded. "Exactly."

Fred let out a soft whoop. "Ten points to Gryffindor!"

"And one un-toasted Champion to boot," Charlotte added wryly. "Always a plus."

"B-But wait," Neville interrupted nervously. "What if it doesn't listen?"

"It should," Hermione reassured him, before a slightly militant gleam entered her eyes. "And if it doesn't, we'll just have to get a Plan B—most likely the Conjunctivitis Curse."

Charlotte raised her eyebrows at the unfamiliar name. "Bless you."

The bushy-haired girl rolled her eyes in return as the twins snickered. "The Conjunctivitis Curse—Con-junk-tiv-i-tis, Charley—is a spell aimed at the eyes to temporarily blind a person by swelling their eyes shut—similar to the infection Muggles call 'pink eye'. Dragon keepers use it as a form of non-lethal defense, since Stunners don't work except in large numbers; most likely, it won't be pretty if you use it, but it'll work."

"Winning isn't exactly on my list of priorities," Charlotte replied quietly. Maybe even a couple weeks ago, it might have been—urged on by some twisted desire to show that she, the celebrity orphan raised in ignorance by Muggles wasn't a waste, to show that she could be more to the society that vilified her every time she drew breath and lauded her as she exhaled. When she had been so utterly terrified she would be alone, except for Neville and Hermione.

At least, until her world had chosen to upend itself on her head, and rewrite the constants of her mess of a life.

For every day since All Saints', that burning desire, the ambition to prove herself had lessened.

It still hummed in some dark part of her, a place she was afraid to acknowledge, but with her parents returned, her godfather exonerated, her professor finally there, and so many others on her side, Charlotte could hardly care less.

I have a family, and every intention of keeping it.

Her voice thoughtful as she turned over the another revelation in her mind, Charlotte best summed it up to her friends in one sentence the best way she could.

"I want to live."

As Charlotte paced the champion's tent, she listened to the distant roars of freaking dragons and tried not to throw up.
She was rapidly re-thinking her life choices, as well as the advice Hermione had drilled into her head.

"Always keep moving for cover," Hermione explained in their dormitory, as Parvati expertly pulled an already nauseous Charlotte's wayward hair back into a tight French braid. "Most likely, whichever dragon face is already going to be extremely mad, and ready to incinerate any witch or wizard within fifty meters of it. There should be cover of some kind for you out there. Keep moving, get close quickly to speak, and whatever you do, do not forget where the tail is, especially if you get the Horntail. If that thing hits you at full force, you'll be lucky not to break your spine."

"I thought the point was not to terrify her senseless," Parvati said irritably as Charlotte swallowed roughly, clenching her hands into fists. "Charley, just don't lose your head or your wand, and don't deliberately piss off the dragon. And take some deep breaths before you pass out, for Merlin's sake."

"I like Parvati's advice better," Charlotte muttered, as she slowly inhaled.

Charlotte continued to take measured breaths as she looked around the tent and observed the others. On the opposite side of the tent from Charlotte stood Fleur Delacour, her face pale but composed, every last blonde hair and silvery button in place as she muttered snatches of spells to herself while she stood beside a silent Madame Maxime.

"...ad somnum...stupore...dormitabus..."

Cedric silently sat besides Fleur Delacour, repeatedly running his hands through his chestnut curls, his face even whiter than Fleur's, if possible. Viktor was equally silent, if perhaps rather more stoic as he remained positioned near the entrance, his crossed arms blocking Durmstrang's crest emblazoned across his chest.

They were all, to a man and woman, terrified; if she'd felt any guilt over telling them about the task before, Charlotte certainly was unable to dredge up any now.

As the four champions listened to hundreds of people walk by the tent, their excited chatter and laughter felt no more alien to Charlotte than if a rocket ship had landed a meter away.

Some more time passed in the silent tent, until as she completed yet another lap of the tent and turned to make another, Cedric suddenly reached out to grab her wrist, grey eyes locked on the youngest champion.

"Potter—Charlotte, just, before the judges show up, I wanted to say—thank you. For telling me about them," he said quietly.

"And me," Delacour chimed in quietly a moment later, her French accent heavier than Charlotte had ever heard.

"And I," Viktor affirmed after that, finally seeming to relax somewhat from his stance as sentry to them all.

"Just trying to keep thing equal between all of us," she responded evenly, somehow not feeling off-kilter as the three Champions focused their attention on her. "Not letting you lot know would hardly have been fair between us."

Cedric's lips quirked. "You almost should be a Hufflepuff, with that mindset."

"Flatter all you like, Cedric—we're still going to destroy you in Quidditch next year."
"You wish."

Both of them let out a brief chuckle, before more laughter bubbled up from both her and Cedric, and before she knew it, the two of them were doubled over in fits of slightly crazed laughter, as Viktor and Delacour watched the two of them in worried confusion.

It really hadn't been that funny, to be honest, but it was, Charlotte knew after hours of exhausting research, a very real possibility that one of them would be dead at the end of the day, and unable to play Quidditch next year.

Everyone in the room, Charlotte suspected, knew the death toll exacted by the First Task, as the part of the Tri-Wizard Tournament with the highest mortality rate. Really, they had two options here: to start screaming, or laugh until the fear couldn't touch them.

As she recovered, wiping her streaming eyes and foggy glasses and sharing a conspiratorial look with Cedric as comprehension dawned on the faces of the other two champions, Bagman thrust the opening flap of the tent open with a flourish, the other four adults hot on his heels. Thankfully, Skeeter was nowhere to be found.

"Good morning, ladies and gents! Gather 'round, gather 'round, if you please," Bagman bubbled happily, looking around the tent, looking rather like a cartoon as the grim champions and solemn headmasters formed a loose semi-circle behind them, but for Charlotte, who had Moody standing at her shoulder, his mechanical eye whirling in its socket.

"Now, you've waited and wondered," he began excitedly, "And now the big day has finally arrived—while the crowd assembles, I'm going to offer each one of you Champions this lovely pouch—"

To emphasize his point, he held up and shook the small sack in his hands, the grin from his face refusing to fade as everyone else in the room stared at him blankly.

"—And from this," he continued, unfazed, "You shall discover what you shall face. There are, eh, several varieties, so you each shall be facing a unique challenge! Ladies and gents, your task shall be...to collect a golden egg!"

Next to her, Cedric swallowed heavily. Charlotte clenched her fists in her pockets to keep them from shaking. Delacour and Viktor's countenances looked like they had been carved from granite. 
Though, Charlotte thought as Bagman, cheerfully offered the sack to the Veela, at least they chose to enter their names!

I'd better not get the Horntail.

Delacour cautiously extended her hand into the bag before drawing out a tiny perfect model of a dragon—the Welsh Green, with the number two around its neck. Viktor in turn drew out a model of the distinctive Chinese Fireball, all reds and golds as it paced the Seeker's hands, huffing smoke. It had the number three.

Cedric was next, extracting the—shit.

He drew out the Swedish Short-Snout, and Charlotte resisted the urge to curse aloud as she then pulled out the Hungarian Horntail, which almost bit her as she looked for the number four around its neck, the model dragon snarling and extending its wings.

As Bagman then congratulated everyone on their selections, pulling Cedric aside, probably to explain when to enter the enclosure outside, Charlotte began to run over in her mind, what Hermione had told her again, her own script that wouldn't leave her as ashes, and the incantation and wand
gestures for the Conjunctivitis Curse, as well as reminding herself to run hard and far if she used it. The curse would most likely cause a rampage, particularly if landed with the Fireball or Horntail, and, well.

She had been handed the fiercest dragon species known to wizards and witches.

As a whistle blew outside, and Bagman went running out, Charlotte stood beside Delacour and Krum as Cedric walked out silently; she only gave him a nod, unsure she would be able to talk if she opened her mouth.

Seconds later, the crowd gave a deafening roar, and over the next fifteen minutes, Charlotte was forced to listen to Bagman's commentary, the worst scenarios forming in her mind.

"Very close, very close, Mister Diggory. . .Ooh, clever idea there, but will it work. . .That looks quite risky, watch as he—oh, dear, I do hope he's quite alright, that looked rather nasty. . .watch your step there, Mister Diggory. . .and. . .Cedric Diggory has gotten his egg! Fantastic effort on his part, and now, for the judges' marks as he walks off the field!"

The three champions in the tent shared looks—not of relief, per say, but maybe a heightening of nerves as they tried to prepare for the other shoe to drop—before Delacour stood up and made for the tent flap, her knuckles white around her wand. Charlotte began to pace again.

"Merlin, I'm not quite sure that was best idea there. . oh ho, it would seem we have another risk-taker here. . .Nice save right there, I was bit worried for a minute. . .dear, dear, dear, I hope she's alright after that. . .lovely girl, it's a shame she's struggling so. . .and Fleur Delacour has her egg! Lovely job from her, but let's see what the judges have to say!"

Viktor at last moved from his position towards the entrance, his stony expression betraying nothing. Charlotte managed a murmur of good luck this time, and resigned herself to waiting yet another turn.

"Very daring, look at Mister Krum go. . .Great Scott, there he goes. . .oh, close miss there. . .and Merlin's beard, that was the fastest yet! Viktor Krum has set a high standard here for our youngest champion, it would seem!"

Said youngest champion swallowed roughly as she heard the Fireball continue to emit a series of loud, grating shrieks. Whatever he had done, it most likely hadn't been pretty.

Abruptly, she realized she had never told her parents what she had been facing. They had said they would be there, watching.

Charlotte briefly wondered what they would do if she died. If the tail hit her, or if she wasn't quite fast enough to outrun dragon fire.

She heard the whistle blow, and with great effort, focused again on her plan.

As Charlotte walked outside onto a plain dotted with shattered stone and twisted metal, she futilely attempted to squash the terror rising inside her to a fever pitch; the waiting, and snatches of commenting, had frayed what composure she had into nothing.

Charlotte came to a stop outside, blinking once, then twice at the magical creature towering over her.

The Hungarian Horntail snarled at the intruder, even as the collar around its neck strained, yellow eyes gleaming with a promise of violence, arching its spine-cover back.

Between its legs lay a nest, Charlotte's intended golden prize gleaming in the rare November
sunlight, among eggs it only resembled in size; each one, she noticed, were larger even than Norbert's had been.

The crowd, though, was the worst.

The stands encircled both dragon and witch with students and teachers screaming and roaring en masse—though whether it was for or against her, she couldn't tell—to the point of drowning out Bagman, which Charlotte could hardly object to.

But before she could think any further, she was forced to dive forward onto the ground, almost smashing her glasses on the gravel as she felt the tell-tale heat of fire above her; when it disappeared seconds later, Charlotte began to duck, dodge, and roll her way forward, instincts honed from years of Quidditch providing the split-second warning necessary to throw herself forwards or backwards to avoid incineration.

In the process, she was often hit with bits of rock and metal, some ricocheting off her frames, with others tangling in her hair or promising bruises tomorrow.

If there was a tomorrow.

Charlotte shook herself at the morbid thought as she crouched below a small lip in the stands. She couldn't afford to think; thinking reminded her to be afraid, to freeze, like any sane human being. She hadn't quite gotten close enough yet, and it looked like she'd have to do some zigging and zagging to get close enough to speak.

Meanwhile, the Horntail grew ever more agitated, flying as high as its restraints allowed, constantly circling for Charlotte as she attempted to get within yelling distance. She ran forward, and threw herself to the left as the Horntail spewed yellow fire with a roar.

Charlotte ducked behind a rock, and listened to the fire crackle as she ducked briefly around to look. *Not quite there.*

Parseltongue didn't allow for much projection, Charlotte thought frantically, she would have to get terrifyingly close—something she may have forgotten to mention to Hermione.

So far, she had gotten off well; she was *so close*, and she could pull it off.

One moment, Charlotte was crouched behind a particularly large boulder; the next, she sprang, running forward as fast as she could, when—

Charlotte forgot to watch the tail. One moment, she was sprinting across the field as with the dull roar of the crowd and the singing of the wind in her ears; the next, she felt a crash of pain in her back, and she was flying forward through the air, senseless.

The dragon roared victoriously.

Charlotte's world went black.

When she came to some time later, Charlotte's face was pressed against the biting cold ground, her head was ringing, and *everything* hurt.

But, her glasses were still on her face, as she noted, as her hands came away from her stinging face speckled with red. But she couldn't do anything about that now.
Dimly, Charlotte noted the dragon was giving a triumphant roar, in the background, while she
checked herself for any immediate pain warning of broken bones. Hands, feet, legs, all in one piece,
lovely. Now, what's Plan G, Potter?

As she lay prostrate on the ground, she tilted her head up enough to notice a large, jet-black rock
between her and the magical reptile—an unbelievably lucky landing spot, she considered as she
curled behind it with a groan. She may have not broken anything, but her shoulders and chest were
protesting her movement.

The rock shielding her would be a suitable platform for yelling at a dragon to shut the hell up already
and listen. She just had to be quick.

Not daring to move before she had to run, she slowly inched up into a low crouch, ignoring her
body's protests. The teenager inhaled deeply, her throat dry, and tried to collect herself. She'd done
this before, under worse circumstances, with far less idea of what she was doing.

Compared to a Basilisk, Tom Riddle in the diary, and the Chamber, a dragon would be positively
easy.

Or so she told herself.

Charlotte then closed her eyes, and listened, to the continual roars of the dragon for what seemed an
eternity. She struggled to search for the dragon's roar, as the crowd, Bagman, and the wind began to
fall away.

"~Who dares threaten me and mine? Face me, skinless worm!~"

It sounded similar to the Basilisk from Second Year, only less thready and much harsher; it was also,
interestingly, made sense, Charlotte supposed, considering the nests.

Charlotte took a deep breath, before poking her head around the rock, nearly screaming in
Parseltongue to make herself heard before the Horntail incinerated her.

"~Wait, please! WAIT!~"

Charlotte had never seen a dragon freeze before. She'd never seen anyone freeze like that before. She
quickly attempted to press her advantage before it—she could speak. "~Please, I don't want to fight.
There's an imposter among your eggs; let me take it, and everyone will leave you alone.~"

The Horntail fixed the full power of its intense yellow gaze on Charlotte, who had to resist the urge
to fidget like a toddler, even as she swallowed roughly, saliva somewhat soothing her stinging throat.

Finally, the dragon returned to its nest without a comment, before ducking her head, inspecting her
eggs—how, Charlotte had no idea. She carefully nudged each of them with her snout, treating each
one as if it were as delicate as a Fabergé egg, not the nigh-indestructible offspring of one of the most
vicious dragon breeds alive. The wind sang through the silent field as the Horntail quietly worked
through her offspring.

Then, she reached the golden egg.

Her sudden screech was loud enough to seemingly make the ground and sky shake, forcing
Charlotte to cover her ears on instinct. The Horntail then snatched the egg up with her fangs, and
hurled it at Charlotte, who barely managed to keep hold of it as it collided with her stomach
painfully.
"Take it, and get away.~"

She didn't need to be told twice, quickly backing away to the tent, doing her best to keep facing the livid Horntail as dragon keepers ran out to try and corral the protective mother, hollering spells and warnings to each other as they attempted to surround the dragon, with one red-haired man leading the charge.

It was only then Charlotte noticed that no one else in the stadium was uttering a single sound.

Madam Pomfrey had only just begun to fuss over Charlotte before her parents burst into the tent, both of their faces pale as chalk. Her father quickly strode across the tent to engulf her in a crushing hug, while her mum began to interrogate the nurse close by as to her "definition of not badly injured, because if it matches up with that blasted commentator, we were clearly watching different events—"

"Still in one piece, Prongslet?" her dad muttered against her hair, distracting Charlotte from listening to her mother's furious diatribe. He leaned back to inspect her himself, his eyes widening as he took in the bruises and cuts littered across her face and neck, as well as her trashed uniform.

In other words, pretty par for the course for Charlotte. Her head was still ringing, and her left shoulder was throbbing insistently, but she could still walk, and she'd been forced to destroy uniforms before.

"It's not that bad—besides, I think I got off alright compared to Cedric and Fleur Delacour."

The Hufflepuff, Charlotte remembered with a wince, had gotten burned pretty badly, while the Frenchwoman's uniform had actually been set on fire.

"Neither of them are my daughter," he muttered, even as the older wizard produced some medical supplies from nowhere. Charlotte felt mildly guilty as she smiled slightly at the statement. Besides, thirty-nine points and first place had been a nice surprise. "Hold still, please, Charley-girl."

"What are you doing?" she asked; none of her injuries were that bad, at least when compared to her track record.

"You have a gash on your left shoulder as long as my wand," he explained anxiously. "It can't be very deep, but I'm not sure if all of that's Gryffindor red."

Charlotte then prodded the throbbing shoulder in question, and grimaced from the pain as her fingers came away drenched in crimson. Her father went pale.

"Let me," he offered quickly, after he glanced around for Pomfrey, who was currently checking on Cedric Diggory behind a curtain. Her mother was currently being dragged away by one Sirius Black, who shot her father a look she couldn't quite interpret; he nodded at her godfather a moment later.

"Have you done this before?" Charlotte asked curiously as he expertly removed tatters of fabric, inspecting the dragon's handiwork with a critical, worried eye.

"More, your grandmother did this for me," her father commented wistfully.

Charlotte tilted her head, curious. "What was she like?"

The wizard gave a melancholic smile. "She was brilliant, of course," he reminisced, voice quiet. "She was constantly fixing me, Padfoot, and Moony up during the summer whenever we got into trouble, and would help us sometimes, when we tried to prank your grandfather Charlus. Constantly
sent me sweets and books while I was at Hogwarts, too. I learned a fair amount about healing from her, which certainly came in handy—after.” His voice cracked on the last word, and then said nothing more.

"What happened?” Charlotte whispered at last. He shook his head, hazel eyes locked on her wound.

"My parents were already older when they had me, and weren’t as..capable, as they used to be by the time I graduated. Then, in the war, they were targets, both as my parents, and people who wouldn’t support Voldemort. Then, one night, when I wasn’t there,” he said fiercely, "The Death Eaters, they..attacked my home. By the time I managed to get there with Mad-Eye, Father was dead, and Mother—the-there was nothing they could do."

He tied off the bandage quickly before tilting his head back, blinking his eyes fiercely behind his glasses; her father was turning away when Charlotte reached forward on some impulse, wrapping her arms around him.

He stiffened in surprise for the briefest of seconds, before settling his chin on her head, and wound his arms around her shoulders, letting loose a shaky sigh. She flailed for a minute—initiating something like this was still new territory for her—before finally settling against her father's chest, arms wrapped tight.

They stayed like that comfortably for a while in the tent, listening to Pomfrey bustling around, and the chatter of the crowd outside.

"I'm sorry."

Her father looked down on her with a confused expression. "You had nothing to do with it, Charlotte—Merlin, you didn't even exist."

Charlotte shook her head. "I know that. Just, I wish—"

"I know," he interrupted, voice heavy. "I do, too."

The two of them shared a wistful look, each drowning in the could-have-been, before he helped her stand up on shaky legs, the adrenaline crash finally hitting her, and they left for the castle.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Please, please, forgive me on Krum's accent. I refuse to write it—my first drafts of his dialogue were horrific—and short of Charlotte or anyone else making a remark on it, or slightly broken English, you'll have to use your imaginations. Miss Rowling is far better at writing them than I am, and I dare not try.
If everyone would at least try to be a little more discreet about their staring, Charlotte would be perfectly happy. It had been nearly a week since the First Task, and everywhere she went, people insisted on pointing and gaping.

"Did you see—"

". . .the dragon didn't even try to—"

". . .a Parselmouth—"

"Just like two years ago—"

"—used dark magic?"

If she weren't so completely done with all of it, it'd be rather funny, considering how worked up everyone was over her talking to a dragon. But really, the parallels to be drawn between now and Second Year were. . .unsettling.

"At least it isn't about your scar this time," Neville said comfortingly to her one morning as they and Hermione grabbed breakfast before Transfiguration.

Charlotte grimaced in response. "I think I almost preferred when everyone was staring at my forehead. Now it's Second Year all over again. Slytherins won't look at me, Huffleuffs are scared I'm going to Petrify someone again—"

"You never did in the first place—" Hermione reminded her.

"—the Ravenclaws don't care, and no one in Gryffindor can figure out how they want to react." Charlotte groused.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, they're being quite ridiculous about it. Durmstrang and Beauxbatons have been tolerable enough, however."

Charlotte could only hum in agreement through a mouthful of toast as she was reminded of the relatively tolerant treatment she'd gained from either schools. Beauxbatons' diverse population—Fleur Delacour was the rule rather than the exception, apparently—had meant the French academy
had instead gained another reason to look down their noses at their hosts for the fuss they were making over their Champion daring to use a magical ability. Meanwhile, Charlotte had almost tripped over the stairs the other day when she had garnered a quick "Bonjour" from a girl who looked like a miniature of Fleur Delacour.

But Durmstrang had been. . . interesting, and not in a particularly good way.

Charlotte had only briefly spoken once with Viktor since the First Task, and that had been to give him directions to the library as well as a warning about Madam Pince. He'd taken it stoically, and Charlotte wasn't quite sure if she'd been believed or brushed off.

But occasionally, while she, Hermione, and Neville were at the library or in the hallways, Charlotte had noticed a few Durmstrang students studying her curiously, like an science experiment gone awry — and they couldn't tell if it was a good or bad thing yet.

Charlotte wasn't sure which way she wanted it; their headmaster gave her the creeps, and every last Durmstrang student down to a man all seemed to practically hero-worship him. She was beginning to suspect that being well-liked by Durmstrang would be the equivalent of Malfoy deciding Charlotte was alright after all.

"Rita Skeeter's been arrested," Hermione commented idly, jerking the other girl out of her thoughts as she almost choked on her breakfast.

"What, really?" Charlotte asked hopefully as she cleared her throat.

After the Task, the gossip-monger had published an article insinuating that Charlotte was the next Dark Lord—or Lady, in her case, citing her use of Parseltongue as well as her convincing Dumbledore and Crouch to expel the reporter from the Weighing of the Wands. Half of the firsties had refused to come within three meters of her for days after that, and Malfoy and Parkinson had been absolutely awful.

And, Charlotte remembered furiously, Skeeter still hadn't gotten her age right in any of her articles. *I'm fourteen, not eleven, or twelve, thankyouverymuch.*

Hermione nodded, her eyebrows slowly raising as she skimmed the newspaper in front of her. "For being an unregistered Animagus, of all things. Apparently, she was caught on Hogwarts grounds a few days ago, by two 'respected, experienced citizens of our fine country'. Hmm, I wonder who that could possibly be?" she asked, brown eyes knowing as Charlotte's jaw dropped.

"Blimey," Neville breathed, his breakfast long since inhaled. "That must have been why your mum and Sirius went off after the task."

"Must be," Charlotte agreed as she checked her watch before swearing under her breath. "We need to go—we're going to be late for class."

As the three Gryffindors hurriedly exited the Great Hall, conversations ground to a dead halt at the tables, quickly replaced by furtive whispers and conspicuous stares.

Charlotte stared determinedly at the back of Neville's head in front of her, even as she heard one phrase repeating itself, hissing through the air; it was one she had believed left in the past—one that unearthed fraught panicked memories, of a sixteen-year-old Dark Lord, his diary, and green light flooding her sight.

"Slytherin's Heir. . ."
Dear Mum,

Did you and Sirius have anything to do with Skeeter being arrested? It was in the papers today, and it mentioned something about a "respected citizen" tipping off Animagi Registration. Malfoy's been an absolute nightmare about it, and has been going around trying to figure out who it was—and failing.

Since you asked—the rest of my year's been alright, after the task, except they're all convinced I'm the Heir of Slytherin again. It's not that I have something against Slytherins (Though I wouldn't want to be in the same House as Malfoy and Parkinson, regardless of which house they're in), but what it would mean, to a lot of people. Voldemort was considered to be the Heir before he died disappeared, and Second Year, his younger self even looked a bit like me. People were getting Petrified by the Basilisk, and thought it was my fault, especially when I spoke Parseltongue in front of half the school. It didn't help that Lockhart—the Defense teacher that year—was an idiot and a fraud.

No word yet on the Second Task and what it will be; the egg just emits this awful screaming. The best theory so far is from Fred and George, who think it's one of their brothers singing in the shower. But it's not until February, so I have a lot of time. Besides, we're all pretty sure it's not going to be dragons again.

Charlotte

P.S. Neville also says to thank you for talking to his Gran about getting him a new wand—they're going shopping over Winter Break.

"Charlotte, d'you have a date for the Yule ball yet?"

"The Yule Ball—What are you talking about, Hannah?"

"The Yule Ball—it's part of the Tri-Wizard Tournament traditions. There's a ball on the eve of Yule, where everyone from Fourth Year on up is invited, and can bring a date to dance, and it's all supposedly a lot of fun. Susan's aunt told her and me about it, and, well. . .um, I wanted to know if you knew if—Neville, he. . ."

"Had a date? No idea."

"You don't mind, then, if I ask him out? I mean, everyone's always thought you two would, well,—"

"Well, what?"

"End up together."

"What? Hannah, he's like a brother, for me and him to want—ew."

"So, you and Neville—"

"No, nope, no, never. Neville is free to go with whoever he wants. Though, Hannah, if you ask him. . ."

"What?"

"I—never mind. Just, don't expect too much? Neville's my best friend, and I don't want him hurt."
Charlotte,

I don't recall you ever mentioning Lockhart your Second Year—only the Basilisk. Remus mentioned the books he had published, and his disappearance at the end of the school year. Do you know whatever happened him? The consensus, according to your father at the ministry is that Lockhart disappeared off the face of the planet. At least your Defense teacher this year used to be an Auror; Moody trained your father and Sirius during the war, teaching them everything he knew as their mentor.

I'm glad Augusta saw reason, and will allow Neville to get his own wand. He seems to be a talented boy by all accounts, but he isn't his father or his mother, wonderful as they were.

As for Rita Skeeter, your godfather had shifted into Padfoot when he smelled her nearby; apparently, all Animagi's scents bear a resemblance to their forms. From there, it was a matter of tracking her down in her Animagus form and talking to the right people. She won't be publishing any gossip correspondence anytime soon, believe me.

Do you want to stay at Hogwarts for Winter Break and the Yule Ball? Even if you decide to stay for the latter, your father and I can pick you up on Christmas Day morning, or Yuletide, as your father insists on calling it. You can come home, and take a break from everything going on at Hogwarts, and if you want, you can bring your friends if their parents agree.

But do be careful, sweetheart. Whoever put your name in the tournament did it for a reason, and it wasn't with your good in mind. Arthur Weasley told us about what happened at the Quidditch World Cup as well. Something is brewing with Voldemort, and by whatever twist of fate, you're at the heart of it. Stay safe, and stick close to Hermione and Neville.

All my love,

Mum

P.S. Don't be surprised if you get few letters from your godfather; he's been rather busy helping Remus navigate the Wizengamot.

"Oh, do sod off, Malfoy. I don't have the time to deal with you today. Some of us actually have lives beyond stalking people and surrounding ourselves with sentient boulders, you know."

"If you would be so lucky as to receive that much attention from me. Potter, I actually wanted to request a temporary alliance between ourselves for a certain formal event three weeks from now, in which would be beneficial for you to consent to be my partner."

". . . Malfoy, did you really just ask me out to the Yule Ball?"

"In light of recent events, I have decided it would be best for both of our families if you consented to go to it with me. I need the most powerful witch on my arm for the event, and as a Champion, you are in need of a suitable date. Nott is going with Davis, I could hardly ask out the Mudblood—"

"Her name is Hermione Granger, and she's twenty times the wizard you could ever dream of being, you—"

"Whatever you say, Potter. And besides, Parkinson isn't nearly as . . . easy on the eyes as you are, for
a half-blood; I imagine you would clean up well enough no one would notice in the first place."

"What? You utter arse, I'd rather kiss a Dementor than go with you. How about you ask Crabbe or Goyle? Their affections for you are reaching rather ridiculous heights these days, I hear—"

"Shut it, Potter! I-I am n-not so-some—"

"It's just a suggestion, Malfoy. All I'm saying is, you should consider the people who've always been there to support you."

"You'll regret this, Potter! My father will hear about this, just you wait!"

"Sure."

December 9, 1994

Mum,

Lockhart got Obliviated by his own Memory Charm. Hermione's glaring at me right now, and telling me I should tell you it was after he tried to Obliviate me and Ron Weasley in the Chamber of Secrets. He'd taken Ron's wand, which had been broken earlier that year by the Whomping Willow, and the spell backfired. He's in Saint Mungo's now, according to Professor Dumbledore, and it all worked out fine. Ginny was rescued, and diary-Riddle was stopped.

As for Winter Break, would it be too much of a bother for Hermione to come with me? Neville's gran is taking him home for wand shopping, and neither of us really want to stay after the ball.

By the way, do you know why you rattled Snape so much when you walked into Potions a few weeks ago?

He's been acting off since, and none of us can figure out why; to compound it, nearly every Slytherin in my year has been acting just as oddly since the First Task. Either they've been more of a nuisance than usual, or have become quiet, and backhandedly diplomatic; Dennis Creevey and Astoria Greengrass were holding a civil conversation the other day. Malfoy actually asked me out to the Yule Ball, claiming "it would be good for both of our families" or some rot like that. I said no, but that's not normal behavior. Usually, he's trying to insult me. There's no reason I know that would cause all them to change like this, and it's unsettling.

Thank you for the package, by the way. The treacle tart was fantastic, and the dress fit perfectly.

Hoping everyone is well,

Charlotte

"Hermione, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Charlotte. I am perfectly alright, with absolutely nothing wrong at all!"

"Okay, then, you're perfectly alright. It's just, you look rather—angry."

"Why on earth would I be angry?"

"I've no idea, Hermione. Did something happen?"
"No, nothing happened to me, but—did you hear that Neville got asked out to the Yule Ball?"

"Really? By who?"

"Hannah Abbott. Why in the world would she ask him out?"

"Well, she has a monstrous crush on him, it's not that much of a surprise, really."

"Yes, I knew that, half the school knew that, but—why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did he say yes?"

"Maybe he likes her back? Hermione, I don't know, why don't you ask him?"

"I can't do that!"

"Wait, Hermione, where are you going, oh—hello, Viktor. Sorry to almost crash into you again."

"It is no problem. Where are you going?"

"Just the library, I suppose. Snape gave us an essay due right before break, and I can't afford anything less than an E if I want to pass Potions."

"Let me walk with you, Charlotte?"

"Sure, I wouldn't mind the company."

December 15, 1994

Charley,

Your father's busy helping Remus plan for the Wizengamot, along with Sirius; fair warning, they're talking with Augusta Longbottom, and they're planning legislation to help werewolves before Lucius Malfoy can find a loophole to force James to pick another proxy. It may make your life at Hogwarts a bit more difficult.

As for your question of Snape, it's a long, painful story.

Do not, under any circumstances, tell anyone what I am telling you, except for Hermione and Neville, if you wish.

I presume Dumbledore has his reasons for employing Snape, but I cannot imagine any possible good ones, after the war.

I'll tell you the full version someday, but for now, here is a summary of it: Snape was my best friend growing up before Hogwarts. Petunia and I had begun to grow apart, and he was my best friend. When we went to Hogwarts, he was Sorted into Slytherin, and me into Gryffindor, but we remained close for a time.

He and I disliked your father, Remus, Sirius, and Pettigrew, to say the least; I called James an arrogant toe-rag on many occasions, which as he will tell you, he was, quite often. Meanwhile, Snape was rapidly falling in with future Death Eaters in his House, and his fascination with the Dark Arts was growing.
Your father grew up, and I fell in love and married him. Snape became a Death Eater, and called me a Mudblood in our Fifth Year. I ended our friendship, and he pledged his allegiance to Voldemort after school. Eventually, he unknowingly sold us out to Voldemort, and then demanded I be protected at all costs once he learned that his actions had undesirable consequences where I was concerned. You know the rest.

Dumbledore may claim Snape is reformed—and he still possesses the influence to make the Minister believe so as well—and he may truly have left Voldemort's side for now, but for the love of Merlin, do not, for one minute, forget what he is capable of. To earn the Dark Mark requires cold-blooded murder, torture, and heartfelt oath of allegiance to the Darkest wizard in history. To maintain his favor, like Snape did? I hope Dumbledore knows what he is doing. If he ever does something that makes you believe he is a threat, don't hesitate to go to Professor McGonagall or Moody.

That being said, don't do anything that would put you in any more danger, and don't change how you act around him. I know it sounds ridiculous, but there is too much happening right now. More importantly, your life is far too precious to risk for anything. Do your best to stay safe, and trust your friends.

All my love,

Mum

"...and with that, I expect an eight-inch essay on Monday detailing the purposes of the Switching Spell and its variants, as well as how to distinguish each spell from the others. Everyone is dismissed for the day—except for Miss Potter. Miss Potter, stay after class for a minute, please."

Charlotte bit back a groan at Professor McGonagall's pronouncement, and looked helplessly to Neville beside her, who only shrugged. On her left, Hermione said comfortingly, "It's probably just about the Yule Ball."

"That's worse," Charlotte muttered, even as she stood up and walked to the Transfiguration professor's desk, leaving her books at her seat.

"Miss Potter," Professor McGonagall began, while she cleaned her classroom with quick flicks of her wand, sending papers and books flying back to their rightful places. "I wished to give you a gentle reminder about the upcoming Yule Ball. It is in nine days, and I wanted to make sure you were adequately prepared. As a Champion, even a rather... unorthodox one, you will be expected to represent Hogwarts, the British Wizarding World, and the House of Godric Gryffindor."

"Oh, no pressure there, then."

"Okay," Charlotte said cautiously. "What do I need to do, then?"

Professor McGonagall pinned her with a strict look. "For one, you will be expected to open the ball with a dance, along with the other three Champions. You do know how to dance, yes?"

"Hermione and Neville have been teaching me," Charlotte admitted. "I'm not particularly good at it, though."

"As long as you can follow your partner and not trip, you will be fine not knowing the exact footwork, Miss Potter," McGonagall said, a hint of a knowing smile playing on the edges of her lips. "Skirts are excellent in that respect, if nothing else. Who is your date?"

"Wait—my date?"
"Yes, Miss Potter, your date," Professor McGonagall prompted sternly. "It is required you have one."

_Oh, bugger._

"I—uh, I, I'll work it out, Professor," Charlotte said sheepishly.

The Transfiguration Professor gave Charlotte a long-suffering look. "Please do so—and preferably in a fashion differing from the other times you, Miss Granger, and Mister Longbottom 'work it out'. I would hate to take points from my own house."

"Yes, ma'am," Charlotte replied cheekily. "Will do, ma'am."

Professor McGonagall sighed, with more than a hint of nostalgia. "You really are your father's daughter, aren't you?"

"I know, ma'am."

"So, what did she want to talk to you about?"

"She wanted to make sure I wouldn't make a fool of myself at the Yule Ball," Charlotte responded to Neville's question, before adding with a grimace. "And to see if I had a date."

Neville raised his eyebrows. "It's required?"

"Unfortunately," Charlotte sighed. "I would ask you, but you're already taking Hannah."

Hermione stiffened at the mention of Neville's date, Charlotte noticed with interest, but made no further mention of it when she spoke again. "How about Fred or George? They think of you as a sister, so you could have a good time without any potential complications."

"Last I heard, they were taking Katie and Alicia," Charlotte said. "And before you say it, Ron Weasley is not my idea of a good date."

"I wasn't going to," Hermione said incredulously. "He still hasn't properly apologized for what he said to you before the First Task, even if he helped you."

Neville gained a thoughtful look. "I suppose you could always ask out Goldstein, or maybe G—"

But before she could hear Neville's other idea, Charlotte saw a familiar Durmstrang student walk by, his eyes briefly meeting hers as he passed, and had an idea.

She wasn't looking for a boyfriend—or girlfriend, for that matter. What she was looking for was someone she could trust to watch her back for one evening, make decent conversation with, and preferably, could dance at least a single waltz with.

While she had no clue about the last one, Charlotte _did_ know that Viktor Krum was someone she could easily talk with, considering the conversations they'd had over the past six weeks, and most certainly knew the pressures of being, well, _them_. Social pressures were not fun; she wouldn't have to worry about being a proper date, or holding up any kind of pretensions, and could possibly come out of it with a firm friend.

It could work. It could also blow up in her face spectacularly—for all she knew, he had a gorgeous girlfriend he was taking, or had already asked someone out other than a Fourth year from a rival school, or preferred men—but that was what Gryffindor courage was for, wasn't it?
Charlotte turned to Neville and Hermione, the latter of whom sighed knowingly. "I know that face. We'll see you at lunch, I presume?"

"Hopefully, with a Yule Ball date," Charlotte said with a slight nervous grin. Neville studied her for a moment, before nodding in assent. "Be careful, Charley. And t-tell him to treat you right."

She rolled her eyes fondly before turning around and running after the Bulgarian Seeker.

"Hey, Viktor, wait up—thank you. Listen, there's something I wanted to talk to you about. . ."
Charlotte just couldn't understand why *now* was when she was getting nerves. She was leaving Gryffindor tower for the ball in less than five minutes, with everything, for once, going smoothly. Viktor had agreed with surprising ease to go with her, Hermione had successfully found a date in Cedric Diggory of all people—how, Charlotte had no clue, and Hermione just turned red whenever she asked—she was fairly sure she knew how to dance the opening waltz without making a fool out of herself, and everything was simply *fine*; fantastic, even.

But if everything was fine, it begged the question: why was she just *so nervous*?

"It *is* your first formal event," Hermione reasoned as Charlotte asked it out loud. "It's natural to feel nervous. Frankly, I'm so scared my hands are practically shaking."

Charlotte looked skeptically at the other Gryffindor's steady hands as Hermione finished taming her hair, before Charlotte turned her head back at Lavender's prompting.

"It's just—I don't even know. It's not as if someone will attack or anything. I mean, my *parents* are going to be there, at 'invitation of the Minister himself,' she quoted in her best approximation of Fudge's pompous way of speaking.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "He's desperate to get in their good graces with Skeeter gone, and both of them so influential in the Wizengamot right now. The only reason Sirius isn't there is because he outright refused it just to make Fudge mad. Besides, I would be comforted if I were you. Your father was an *Auror* in the first war, and your mother was as good as one. Nothing will happen."

"Maybe just you really like him—Krum, I mean," Lavender offered as she touched up Charlotte's quite frankly impeccable makeup—a wordless apology, similar to Faye teaching Charlotte how to run in high heels without breaking her ankles. "I mean, he *is* an international Quidditch player, and he likes attention about as much as you do."

Parvati snorted from behind the blonde as she inspected herself in a mirror, adjusting the golden flower set against her dark hair. "Forget the Quidditch or being a grouch—he's *gorgeous*, Lav. I've seen what Durmstrang's dress uniforms are. Anyone with a *fraction* of Krum's shoulders and figure would look handsome, let alone him. And those *eyes*. . ."

"His eyes aren't really why I asked him out," Charlotte said, any lingering fear rapidly disappearing
in the face of annoyance at any suggestions she'd really be that superficial. Honestly. "And I am not a grouch. We just...have things in common."

"We're not denying that," Faye Dunbar commented innocently from her left, before adding wickedly, "We're not denying you're not exactly wanting for eye candy there, either. Not quite my kind of eye candy, but I know handsome when I see it. You got lucky, Potter."

"Certainly luckier than the rest of us," Parvati bemoaned. "I'm going with Ron Weasley. Ron. Weasley. Diggory's alright, Lavender's wrapped some poor boy from Beauxbatons around her little finger—"

"I'll have you know, he asked me," Lavender said primly, as she now inspected her ice blue dress for imaginary bits of dust before cleaning up some of the mess.

"—and Charley managed to find proper Felix Felicis there in tall, dark, and foreign," Parvati continued, "Even Faye's managed to convince her Ravenclaw goddess to go with her, though how, I have no idea—"

"Watch it, Patil."

"I'm telling the truth, Dunbar; most wizards aren't exactly fond of the idea of two witches together. Sue Li's stupid for you, but not stupid in general. But back to the point: Weasley isn't exactly Prince Charming."

"He's fourteen like the rest of us," Hermione replied sharply, even as she meticulously checked every last strand of her tamed hair was in place, before helping Lavender.

Charlotte bit down on a snicker as she helped Lavender organize her terrifying army of products; even where Ron was concerned, Hermione was determined to keep everyone from unfairly bashing. "None of us are exactly Cinderella, either."

"Who?" Lavender asked blankly, while Parvati inclined her head in concession, and Charlotte and Faye hummed in agreement.

Hermione sighed frustratedly. "She's a...Oh, never mind. I'll explain more later. We need to leave; McGonagall will kill us if Charlotte's late."

Charlotte shook her head carefully—despite whatever magic had been worked by the combined forces of Hermione and Lavender on her hair, it still felt rather unstable—as she made for the stairs. "Forget her; can you imagine what the Minister would do?"

"Most likely? Babble a load of nonsense to Dumbledore and Crouch."

"...Good point." she conceded.

With the last of their banter done, and every last speck of lipstick, curl of their hair, and piece of jewelry in its proper place, the Fourth Year girls descended into the empty common room and then through the echoing corridors of Hogwarts without fanfare, or any comment from Charlotte.

To her, it all seemed a fever dream, the shiny glitz and glamour that seemed to have descended in one mass upon the castle inhabitants, transforming them all utterly. She had yet to see Neville, but she already could barely reconcile the elegant lady clothed in lavender with her hair all swept up in an elegant bun, with her no-nonsense, bushy-haired best friend.

It had been a very strange day already for Charlotte—and she hadn't even danced the first waltz.
She wasn't quite sure if it was a good or bad thing yet.

When she'd taken her first proper look in the mirror after Lavender and Parvati had gleefully seized upon the chance to finally see if her wild hair—thanks, Dad—could finally be corralled, it had been a bit disorienting.

Her hair had been pulled into some dramatic braided structure, a few errant curls framing her face in a manner that actually seemed deliberate for once (Whether it was, she would never know). That, combined with some kind of dust Lavender had claimed would "give her the complexion of Celestina Warbeck", had created someone in the mirror Charlotte didn't know. They weren't half-bad to look at, she had acknowledged, but...very distinctly not what she'd seen in a mirror for the last fourteen years.

Quite frankly, she liked her dress far more than her hair. She felt rather pretty, and as elegant as Hermione looked, but in a way that wasn't quite as foreign. Thankfully, neither of Lavender or Parvati had suggested replacing her glasses with any magical measure; she had no clue what could, but Charlotte didn't doubt there was some solution thought up by some wizard whose name had been bastardized by Binns in the past.

She didn't think she'd have taken it anyway; her glasses, while annoying at times, were extremely similar to her father's, and the resemblance was always strangely comforting.

"Charlotte." At Parvati's calling of her name, she nearly tripped over herself as she was jerked out of her mental ramblings.

As she regained herself, she looked to the other witch. "Yes?"

"We're here."

Surely enough, Charlotte quickly realized not six inches from her the stairs leading to the Great Hall began, temporarily frozen for the evening. "Ah—thanks, Parvati."

At the bottom, stood a taciturn-looking Viktor Krum in a striking red uniform and fur cape, and a paler Cedric Diggory in black dress robes.

Charlotte turned to Hermione as Parvati, Faye, and Lavender quickly walked down the stairs as they continued to chatter, and couldn't quite suppress the feeling of guilty satisfaction as Hermione looked as if it was her painful death, and not a Hufflepuff whom had been swooned over by half of Hogwarts awaiting her at bottom of the staircase.

At the very least, neither of them would be alone if something went wrong in the next few minutes; and it was that thought, rather than any amount of bracing words, that led Charlotte to subconsciously straighten and look to her friend, offering her hand.

"Shall we, Hermione?" Charlotte asked quietly, a quiet smile curving her painted lips. Hermione turned her head to Charlotte, and nodded jerkily as she took Charlotte's hand.

"Don't let me fall?" Hermione said, in a rare pleading tone.

"Just keep me from doing the same," she swiftly promised Hermione, who only gave her the familiar patented look of we're-in-this-together-moron-of-course. It was one of the more beautiful sights Charlotte had ever seen.

And with that, the two Gryffindors descended the stairs, neither faltering for a second. At the bottom, Viktor silently came to attention, and offered her his arm; as she took it, she could see Hermione give
Cedric an awkward smile as Fleur Delacour swept in front of them, a dumbstruck Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain, at her side.

Then, Professor McGonagall called for the Champions. Charlotte looked up to Viktor, and they shared a brief look, resigned to their shared fate, before following Cedric and Hermione out to open the ball.

*Here goes. . .something, I suppose. Here's hoping it's a good one.*

She didn't trip over her own feet, thankfully. Or anyone else's, for that matter.

Viktor proved to be excellent at the waltz, sweeping her along to the swells of strings from an invisible orchestra, his cape flaring out behind him with each turn and spiral; and somewhere between the first light refrain and the sweeping end, when they made their way toward a table, she found herself engrossed in his descriptions of Durmstrang, tuning out Percy Weasley's loud pompous blustering about his job under Crouch with no effort at all.

"You're kidding," Charlotte breathed in awe. "That just can't be possible—you can't have *that* much room."

"I do not kid, Charlotte; there is space of that size," he responded, his dark eyes bright with suppressed laughter at her unveiled disbelief.

"No, not that, I believe you," she brushed aside. "But that much space, and that kind of view you say you've got? I'd never get off my broom, much less go to class. How do any of you manage with that?"

"We—cope," Viktor replied with a straight face as he pulled out a silver chair for her.

As she swept her ivory skirts into place, Charlotte giggled, feeling significantly lighter than she had at the beginning of the evening. "I can imagine how. Do any of you ever get caught?"

"Небе! I am a Quidditch player for Bulgaria, Miss," Viktor exclaimed haughtily. Charlotte tilted her head, and studied him from behind her menu.

"Is that a no, then?"

Viktor paused for a minute. "That is. . .heavens, I believe, in English."

Charlotte gave him a *look* as his lips turned up slightly to match her own begrudging smile, before spitting out his supper request to the plate in front of him. "Musaka."

"Not Merlin?" Charlotte asked curiously as she observed some mix of meat and potatoes appear on the golden plate in front of Viktor. "Er, Yorkshire pudding."

"No, we do not. . .worship a man the same as the British," Viktor ventured warily. Charlotte gazed at him for a minute, but let the subject pass, instead choosing to take a bite of her—admittedly delicious—meal.

"It is very different, in many ways, in home. We have a castle also, but not so big or grand, and colder—the fire are lit for magical reasons alone, and it is—softer, here. But, the grounds surrounding our school. . .I have told you, Charlotte. It is beautiful," he said reverently. "In summer, we *fly*, over the lakes and mountains, and it is bright for such brief a time, but it is very much—"
"Careful there, Viktor!" Karkaroff cut in a loud, jovial tone, several seats down from them. Charlotte studied him suspiciously; his wand was nowhere to be seen, but his eyes were as cold as the ice upon the Black Lake. "As charming a lady she is, we wouldn't want her to find us, now, would we?"

"I don't know, sir," Charlotte said evenly. Somewhere in the back her mind, she noted that his tone reminded her of Quirrell, in retrospect—hiding something that made her skin crawl and her scar twinge. "Why wouldn't you? You've seen Hogwarts already."

"Indeed!" Dumbledore chimed, his eyes twinkling merrily. "Igor, at this rate, we'll all be utterly convinced you don't want anyone to find you."

Karkaroff’s smile widened, showing all of his yellowed teeth. "Perhaps not, Albus; after all, is it not our right to jealously guard our schools, our homes, and the secrets they possess? Are you not protective over your domain here, as I am of mine? We can hardly afford for some curious soul such as Miss Potter here to stumble across us."

Charlotte furrowed her brow at his dismissive tone, but was distracted from Dumbledore's response—something involving a disappearing bathroom available only on a full moon or when in "dire need of relief"—when Viktor drew her back into conversation with a question on the House Quidditch teams, and who was the best.

"Gryffindor, of course," she said, grinning, "Our former captain was barking mad, but was more dedicated than the rest of us put together."

She told him a few very highly edited stories about her games, and asked him what convinced him to try the Wronski Feint. The answer was unsurprising, to her.

"I wanted to end my way," he said simply, "That may have been my last chance to compete in the cup, for what I know."

From there, they soon found themselves to the subject on professional country teams, where Charlotte found Viktor was almost scandalized—a change from his usual stolid demeanor she found rather charming. Not a word, Lavender.

"You do not have a team?"

"Have a team?" she asked in confusion. "The only one I know about is the Chudley Cannons from one of my classmates."

Viktor shook his head. "That can't stand. The Cannons are. . .not good."

Charlotte chuckled, almost choking on her treacle tart. "Don't I know it. He never quits talking about how awful they are; even Hermione get depressed listening, sometimes, and she doesn't even like Quidditch. Who do you support, then?"

"The Vratsa Vultures. They are from Bulgaria, of course. Ever since I was a child; my father took me to games. It was how I started, on their youth team," Viktor said, his eyes far away. "They won the European Cup 1989, last, and are still good. Ivanova—my teammate—she is a Chaser for them."

"Do you have any suggestions for whom I should support then?" Charlotte asked. "Other than the Vultures, that is."

"Other than the Vultures? Very difficult. An English or Irish team, I think. . .Perhaps the Catapults?" Viktor suggested.
"Why them?"

Viktor raised his eyebrows. "Do you know the name Dai Llewellyn?"

It rang a faint bell, raising memories of early memories and bloody long lectures from Oliver Wood. "Faintly. He was a Seeker for them, wasn't he?"

"He was known as one of the most brilliant Seekers ever, taking risks no one else dares."

Charlotte grinned. "I like him already."

"He did get killed by a Chimaera on holiday."

"Even better," Charlotte said firmly, to which Viktor raised his thick eyebrows skeptically—she thought. He was rather hard to read at times. But she'd seen pictures of Chimaerae—Basilisks were larger. And that was a bit beside the point.

The idea of a complacent, normal life did not appeal at all.

Charlotte had spent over a decade seeing a normal life with the Dursleys; dull was the first word that came to mind when she heard normal. Lacking was another. She loved the thrill that came with flying, and loved exploring the world that came with her magical heritage. The idea of living a life where she could play Seeker like Llewellyn, and travel far enough to find a Chimaera—hopefully not within range of Hagrid, Merlin knew what he would do with one—was a dream that had before only briefly lingered at the edges of her consciousness.

Anonymity had been one of her dearest wishes for four years, but Charlotte only wondered now which one she would prefer: an exciting life led on her own terms, like Llewellyn, or an anonymous life where no one stare, and would be as dull as that she'd on Privet Drive.

She could definitely do without death by Chimaera, though.

Charlotte said as much before they changed the subject; discussion of other Quidditch teams led to and surprisingly a discussion of books—Apparently, the life of a star Quidditch athlete was conducive to reading—that she found surprisingly fun.

While no bookworm, Charlotte had a longstanding love for mystery novels, and held Agatha Christie in the highest esteem; Viktor, surprisingly confessed quietly to vastly preferring Muggle fiction—something she could hardly imagine Karkaroff approving of—often reading what was considered classic in Bulgaria religiously, and Nikola Vaptsarov most of all, apparently.

"A poet, and most...enlightening." he said quietly, with a quick flick of the eyes to an oblivious Karkaroff.

"What did he write about?" she asked.

Krum was silent for a while. "He wrote about the oncoming mechanical age, and a new, foreign ideology."

Eventually, a brief lull in conversation came over the two, and their own small bubble of comfortable silence.

Charlotte took the opportunity to look around the Hall, tuning out the criticisms of Hogwarts by Delacour to Davies, instead noting with some surprise that Hermione had taken to the dance floor with Cedric, comfortably swaying to what sounded suspiciously like an instrumental from a
Celestina Warbeck song.

Worryingly, she could see Cho Chang, resplendent in an generously embroidered, figure-hugging gown, glaring at them with pure venom, another curly-haired Fifth Year beside her. Despite it being her best friend in question being glared at so harshly, Charlotte briefly felt her heart go out to the Ravenclaw Seeker.

Cho’s feelings for her Hufflepuff counterpart had lacked the subtlety of a brick, and Cedric had similarly exhibited the emotional awareness of one where Hermione and Cho were concerned. While she still had no idea how Hermione and Cedric had wound up as dates, everyone was aware of how Cho had asked, and had been rejected.

But it was only when she then saw an awkward-looking Neville in conversation with Hannah Abbott close by, glancing at Hermione and her date every few seconds with the now-familiar expression of blind adoration that Charlotte gained an urge to bang her head against the table.

The last thing she needed was an actual love triangle between her best friends and one of the Champions now, with a rejected ’Claw in the mix.

Bitterly, she couldn't help but remember how she told Neville, and later Hermione to simply talk, and sort everything out. Now, she had a romance cliché entering Georgette Heyer levels to unravel without getting anyone hurt or getting hexed herself in the process. Universe, if this is your way of saying it's unrequited love messes or Voldemort, I'll take the evil murdering psychopath right now, please.

She was quickly torn out of any romantically-inclined thoughts, though, when Viktor stood up abruptly, and offered her his hand. "Charlotte, would you dance with me?"

Charlotte surreptitiously glanced to the dance floor, where a happily smiling Dumbledore was leading a rather red-cheeked Professor McGonagall through some lively, complicated dance beside Hagrid being lead by Madame Maxime in a rather simpler, but no less lively routine, and several student pairings, mainly made up of the distinctive red uniforms of Durmstrang, as well as various grey dresses of French design.

It still held plenty of space, though. "I would, Viktor."

She took his hand and they left the table, which at this point, held Karkaroff, his staff, Bagman, and Percy Weasley. Delacour and Davies, Charlotte supposed with no small amount of relief, had gone off somewhere ages ago when the French woman had tired of picking apart Hogwarts.

She had liked Delacour well enough, but no one liked to hear their school be insulted repeatedly—unless, apparently, you were Roger Davies.

But, as Charlotte attempted to pick her way down the few steps separating their table from the rest, her left heel caught in the fabric of her outfit—her dress was beautiful, but the skirts were voluminous, and a bit tricky to navigate—and she fell gracelessly down the stairs, and onto the floor.

Or, almost, actually.

Why, oh why, do I keep falling into boys' arms of late? It's getting rather ridiculous, and I am not some clumsy, star-eyed, First Year, damn it.

Charlotte was caught and steadied at the last second by a vaguely familiar blond-haired boy in black, exactingly tailored dress robes. She straightened hurriedly as Viktor hovered beside her, feeling her cheeks burn, and as she pushed a few errant curls behind her ears, she gave an apology that was
rather half-hearted even to her own ears.

"I'm sorry for falling, er. . .?"

The boy gave her a smooth, practiced smile, showing none of his teeth. "Hector Greengrass, Miss Potter. It's a pleasure to finally . . . make your acquaintance."

As he gracefully bent at the waist, his cobalt eyes glittered with unadulterated loathing.

"Potter."

"Mad-Eye."

As James nodded to his former mentor from where he stood in the shadows of one alcove—he was absolutely not skulking, no matter what his wife said—he ran a critical eye up and down the ex-Auror, old instincts taking over.

For some reason, the way Moody seemed to be holding himself seemed—off. Nothing James could immediately pinpoint, and probably would have dismissed as the paranoia that Moody lived his life by, particularly considering the event they were at, but Prongs was projecting unease as if there was no tomorrow.

Taking the stag's nervousness into account, he engaged the older wizard in terse conversation, taking note of his body language and responses as he did so.

"Anything go wrong, yet?" he asked quietly.

Moody snorted. "Not unless you count the grounds being infested with half-drunk students tearing each other's clothes off, laddie."

James snorted as Moody took a great swig from his hip flask, and asked an idle question about Karkaroff—who was _far_ too close to Charlotte and her date, some boy from bloody Durmstrang of all things, for his liking.

"Bloody traitor, he is, laddie," Moody growled, his mechanical eye whirling in its socket, "I hunt him down after days of fighting, idiot Death Eater takes a chunk of my nose from me in the duel when I arrest him, I drag him in to face justice, and what does the coward do? Bloody betrays everyone he ever fought with in a pathetic attempt to stay out of Azkaban. I tell you, laddie. . . ."

Moody continued to reminisce but James stopped listening, a memory from the war—in the last days before he, Lily, and Charlotte had gone into hiding, in fact—resurfacing.

"I call you by your surname, Black, because last I checked, none of you were schoolboys anymore," Moody drawled, rolling both of his brown eyes as he walked across the room, his fake leg banging against the floor, causing Peter to flinch as he got closer.

"You call Dumbledore laddie once in a while, Mad-Eye," James pointed out. "Why do you insist on calling us by our last names?"

Moody fixed him with a piercing stare. "I call him that because for all of his abilities, Dumbledore is not an Auror, nor does he want to be one. He hasn't been trained as you sorry lot have. You are an Auror, Potter, and will be aged beyond your years by this job, war or not. That makes you, Black, and the rest of you idiots closer to adults than the man who runs us all ragged. Constant vigilance comes with a price, and you all pay it for our society in this sorry war."
Fact: "Laddie" was a verbal tick that Moody had never, in fact, used with any of his trainees.

Fact: Unless something had changed in the last decade or so, that flask of Moody's—which James had just seen him drink out of—still contained some potent variation on Firewhiskey.

Fact: No way in hell would the Alastor Moody he remembered—or one that Dumbledore would have considered hiring; the man was nothing if not protective of Hogwarts—have considered drinking at an event such as this, or with such threats as what they had confided in him to be after the Prongslet.

Fact: Moody was being awfully trusting of James, considering he and Lily had *come back from the dead*. He had never interrogated them, asked them questions they would know the answers to, or even fixed one of them with a suspicious stare.

Conclusion: If that wasn't Polyjuice Potion in the flask, James was the second coming of Merlin.

The man in front of him was not Alastor Moody.

James had no clue who—or what—was in front of him, but he doubted it was anything with the intentions of fairies and butterflies.

But who could impersonate a fucking *Auror*, much less one as paranoid as Mad-Eye under the watchful eye of Albus Dumbledore for months?

The answers were nothing good.

James tersely made his excuses to the imposter, and turned around, his eyes scanning the busy hall with practiced ease.

If a Death Eater or worse had managed to infiltrate Hogwarts, it was a very good thing Dumbledore and Amelia Bones were there tonight.

Chapter End Notes

_A/N: So, I did a bit of research on Bulgaria so I didn't make shit up—emphasis on a bit. Krum's going to be sticking around for a while, so feel free to correct me on any fallacies (Note: I am sticking to the original HP timeline, so the story is currently circa 1994-1995, a few years after the collapse of the USSR.) Lastly, I essentially wrote this entire chapter with this song playing on loop. Make of that what you will._
"Now winter is truly coming. In the winter, we must protect ourselves, look after one another."

-Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, A Song of Ice and Fire

"Hector Greengrass, Miss Potter. It's a pleasure to finally... make your acquaintance." As he gracefully bent over to brush his lips over her limp hand, his cobalt eyes glittered with unadulterated loathing.

"Likewise," Charlotte returned, taken aback by the amount of feeling in them; the rest of Greengrass screamed of the self-assured ego he shared with Draco Malfoy, lacking any true emotion. But his eyes—a very different, loathing story was told by his expression, though Charlotte hadn't a clue why.

"This is Viktor Krum," she added belatedly, gesturing to the other Champion beside her, realizing she had been staring.

"An honor, Mister Krum," Greengrass said to Viktor, his voice warming by several degrees in the process as he inclined his head briefly. "My own date, I'm afraid, has just left me to find a friend, I believe—Sally Smith, one of our year-mates. Of course, you most likely are more familiar with Miss Potter."

He paused, but Viktor only stared blankly at him.

Charlotte fought the urge to give a vicious grin even as she grew more confused as to what, exactly, Greengrass was attempting to accomplish; none of them were the Heads of their respective families, and the Yule Ball was pretty far from the Wizengamot, Sacred Twenty-Eight, and its politicking (None of them were even heirs yet, according to her father. They couldn't claim that until they turned fifteen).

The resemblance to Draco Malfoy was uncanny from their First Year, Charlotte mused. Actually, it was the resemblance to Malfoy now was uncanny.

Only, Greengrass, she suspected, had more of a brain than Malfoy. The Slytherin flushed even so slightly around his marble cheekbones at the awkward silence, before continuing.

"The Girl Who Lived, Hogwarts's own feckless celebrity. Tri-Wizard Champion, Mister Krum," he said, his contemptuous tone eerily reminiscent of Snape's own quiet mocking. "Her reputation precedes her, of course. Of course, you'd know this, daring to associate with her as Miss Potter's date."

Viktor looked at him with a bemused expression, even as his grip tightened on her arm at the insult;
not enough to hurt, but more than enough to reassure. "You and I must have different memory, then. I agreed to attend with her as friends. Nothing more, or less."

Charlotte knew she had asked Viktor out for a reason.

While there was no discernible crack in the Slytherin's veneer, Greengrass's voice wasn't quite as smooth as before when he spoke again—although his cut-glass accent and slight insufferable smirk remained unshakeable. "From your point of view, perhaps, Mister Krum, but I think we can agree that some of us, unlike her, need not worry about—Sally, you're back."

Before he could say anything further, Sally Smith descended upon them. She smoothly swept past Charlotte, all dark emerald green with the occasional sharp glitter of diamond, creating a sharp contrast with her gleaming dark hair.

The smile she gave Charlotte and Viktor was amiable enough, but Charlotte didn't miss the cold gleam in the other girl's green eyes, or the deliberate manner in which she turned to Greengrass, curling her hands around his right arm in a proprietary manner, her eyes locking on Charlotte's.

If Charlotte's hadn't felt a bit out of her depth before, she certainly did now. Malfoy and Parkinson were bullies, if starting to widen their range of insults. But Charlotte knew what they wanted, and how to make Malfoy whimper.

But Hector Greengrass and Sally Smith were... different. Before tonight, she'd hardly exchanged three words with him, and had known little about him, other than apparently he and Malfoy barely got on, despite the shared connections. Greengrass also, if Hermione's complaining was anything to judge by, was excellent at Arithmancy—and knew it.

Less brash than Malfoy, if rather convinced of his own importance, if this conversation was any indication. Really, trying to get close to a celebrity at a school ball?

She was rather happy she hadn't known him before tonight, if that was the case.

Sally Smith, however, was a completely different story. Charlotte knew her, if only from afar. She had received an ear-splitting Howler every day for a week after the Sorting, decrying the shame she had brought upon her family—a family, Charlotte had been very shocked to learn, included Zacharias Smith—for being Sorted into Slytherin, much less to a different house.

Her face had always been as stony as Snape's was when confronted with Gryffindors—and later on, her attitude towards non-Slytherins just as cruel, practicing her sneers with Pansy Parkinson and Tracey Davis.

But that might have been her, Charlotte realized, a sudden chill traveling down her spine. A lonely, ostracized First Year for something beyond their control, shunned and snubbed for bucking the trend in where to get Sorted?

If she hadn't asked the Sorting Hat, pleaded with it, for anywhere other than Slytherin, away from Draco Malfoy and his goons—it was like looking in a mirror at a funhouse, right down to their shared dark hair and green eyes.

"Hector, shouldn't you introduce us? Your friends here are perfect strangers to me." Smith exclaimed, giggling lightly as she twirled an errant curl around a single finger, the motion smooth and planned. The red lipstick she wore looked like blood, Charlotte observed distantly.

Greengrass gave the Gryffindor a practiced smirk, even as he spoke to his date. "I would never call us friends, dear."
"No," Charlotte agreed. "I really wouldn't."

"I try not to associate below my rank or outside the right mindset," Greengrass continued. "Particularly with those with such a... unique view of themselves and their importance."

Sally Smith tittered. Viktor was looking increasingly uncomfortable at the back-and-forth, and that, for some reason, was what sent Charlotte over the edge.

This was the Yule Ball. Viktor hadn't asked to be involved in this. If Charlotte was going to be there, she certainly wasn't going to let Hector Greengrass insult her date, while they actually stood a chance of having fun.

"You know," Charlotte said before she could stop herself. "If you're trying to insult me, please just say it. I really just want to get some pumpkin juice, and I can't see the point of this, otherwise. I mean, Snape's said far worse about me. You're not even original."

Hector Greengrass's mouth opened, ever so slightly, and Charlotte felt the odd combination of victory and horror surge through her. Oh, I just said that, didn't I?

So much for diplomacy. Charlotte looked to Viktor helplessly, who gave her a slight nod, something like approval crossing his face.

Greengrass, meanwhile, was ice personified when he spoke again. "In that case, Potter, I take my leave. No need to waste my or Sally's time any more with your ilk."

Begrudgingly, Charlotte had to admire their style as the pair gracefully swept away towards the table where a sour-looking Malfoy, Parkinson, and their minions sat.

With the two Slytherins gone, she turned and gave Viktor a weak smile, suddenly feeling slightly tired. "Drinks, then?"

Viktor nodded silently, his face unreadable. As he strode forward Charlotte saw over his shoulder a taciturn-looking Professor Moody sitting a few tables back, eyes locked on an oblivious Karkaroff. Weird.

But before either Seeker could get very far, a very harried-looking James Potter appeared out of nowhere, and pulled them to the side.

"Dad?" Charlotte asked confusedly as she met worried hazel eyes.

"Charlotte, good," he said, apparently relieved. "And your date, I suppose," her father added, his eyes flicking dismissively to Viktor before returning to her. "Right, we need to find Lily and Albus. There's been a—development, I suppose you could call it. Follow me."

Charlotte could barely keep up with the pace he was setting in her heels, but that didn't stop her from trading dubious looks with Viktor before saying pleadingly, "But what's happening? Should I get Professor Moody?"

"No!" James Potter yelped as he froze mid-step, looking around frantically for something, oblivious to the stares before saying again quietly, "No, Charley. That's probably the worst thing you could do right now. I'll explain once we find the Headmaster and your mother."

Charlotte frowned. "But—"

"Looking for me and Lily, James? Whatever for?"
At suddenly hearing the familiar kindly voice from behind her, Charlotte jumped, before whirling around to face the Headmaster standing innocently behind her, her face accusing.

Dumbledore gave a slight chuckle. "My apologies, Charlotte, I did not mean to startle you."

Charlotte raised her eyebrows disbelievingly, but didn't say anything as he turned to her father. "I believe you wanted to see me and your wife, my dear boy? Lily, last I saw, was talking with Professor McGonagall, Hagrid, and Madame Maxime behind me."

James nodded, letting out a deep breath. "Good. That's—good."

He seemed to wrestle with himself for a minute while Dumbledore stood patiently, and Charlotte and Viktor watched bemusedly, before finally spitting out, "Albus, you didn't hire Mad-Eye Moody."

Charlotte blinked at the declaration. What did he mean, Dumbledore hadn't hired Moody?

Thankfully, the Headmaster seemed to agree with her. "There would seem to be evidence to the contrary, James," he said in a good-humored tone.

Her father shook his head. "No, you did not hire Mad-Eye Moody," he repeated, his face deadly serious. "Take a good look at him, Albus. It's a good job done by whoever it is, but they dropped a few things. Don't you think it's odd he's drinking in public like this, when we know there's danger? You know as well as I do that's not pumpkin juice in there. And whatever happened to 'constant vigilance'? He barely batted an eyelid at Lily and I after Samhain. You remember him from the war as well as I do."

As her father spoke, Charlotte's eyes widened, as she recalled all of her DADA classes. Moody had emphasized the importance of paranoia, constantly yelling "CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" to make all of them jump, as well as the various ways to be taken off guard in a duel or at home.

Dumbledore seemed to be drawing similar conclusions as he studied James Potter, his blue eyes intense. "You are absolutely sure?"

He nodded, his jaw tightening. "I wouldn't joke about this."

At this, Albus Dumbledore straightened, his face gained a militant cast, and for the first time, Charlotte could see how the eccentric headmaster who offered students Muggle sweets could have fought in a war.

"In that case, it is a very good thing that Amelia Bones and Kingsley Shacklebolt are with us tonight."

Despite the situation, Charlotte still had to fight the urge to smile a little as her parents held hands while listening to Amelia Bones—who had a tall, bald black man, presumably Kingsley Shacklebolt, behind her—and Dumbledore quietly, fiercely, argue the best course of action.

It was doubtless inappropriate, considering she'd just found out her Defense professor was probably a Death Eater, but the affection still made her want to smile a little. Of course, a little of it was because she had her wand. She'd been caught off guard a few too many times to not bring her wand with her, particularly in a situation like this.

Though, beyond being prepared, how to handle such a situation where the Defense teacher was evil, again, was currently a subject of fierce debate between Madam Bones and Professor Dumbledore.
"Albus, that—man, or whoever he is, has been in this castle for months, trusted freely by you and the teachers, teaching children—teaching my niece," Bones whispered, her eyes set on an oblivious Not-Moody. "He should be arrested and out of the castle immediately, for the safety of students."

From her place between her mother and Viktor, Charlotte nodded in agreement with Madam Bones. It made sense; get rid of the impostor now, before any more harm could be done.

Dumbledore gave a beleaguered sigh. "Amelia, I fully agree."

"Well, then—"

"But," Dumbledore interjected, "If we confront him right now, it will not end well for us. We will most likely eventually defeat him, yes, but what about the cost? It will be far too high. Any attempted evacuation of the students would be quickly noticed by him, and it would terribly easy for him to take a hostage. By waiting until the ball is finished, we will, in fact, do a far better job of preserving the safety of every student within Hogwarts."

Though, Charlotte realized with a frown, Professor Dumbledore had a point, too.

Most of the students in the Great Hall weren't Seventh Years; out of those who were, Charlotte suspected most of them hadn't brought their wands.

If Not-Professor Moody turned out to have any murderous inclinations. . .

Charlotte watched Neville, his face as red as a tomato, bring Hermione out to the dance floor. Cho Chang casually strode over to Cedric Diggory, two glasses in hand; Ron Weasley and Luna Lovegood danced—at least, Charlotte thought it was dancing—beside Faye Dunbar and Sue Li, who were looking ridiculously soppy.

It would be a massacre, Charlotte realized. Almost none of them would stand a chance against a wizard able to impersonate Mad-Eye Moody for months.

Despite this, Madam Bones pressed on. "I know, Albus. That's why I want you and Shacklebolt with me, while the Potters, Minerva, Maxime, and any other teacher you can find start moving the students into groups that can be shielded. Don't involve Karkaroff. If the impostor turns out to be a Dark wizard or Death Eater, I don't want Karkaroff in charge of protecting students."

"Amelia, I must say, I still do not think that would be the wisest course of action, attempting to outright arrest him right now—" Dumbledore began, before he was cut off by Madam Bones, as she drew herself up.

"Dumbledore, you are not an Auror, nor a member of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," Madame Bones told him, her voice all forged steel. "As Headmaster of Hogwarts, we are doing you the courtesy of informing you of the arrest that is about to occur within school boundaries. If you have a problem with it, you can file an official complaint through the suitable channels at a later point in time. I am not that suitable channel, despite your status. Now, kindly stop obstructing my employees, and get out of my way."

Charlotte watched as the Headmaster gave a resigned sigh as her father offered up a quiet, "You're both right, Albus. But you can't stop her."

But before anyone could say anything else, Charlotte heard the distinctive steps of a wooden leg from around a corner. She turned around to see the impostor Moody standing in front of them.

"Something amiss, Dumbledore?" Not-Moody growled, his bright blue eye flicking to each of them
in turn. "You all seem to be having an interesting little pow-wow."

No one spoke for a tense moment. Charlotte slowly reached for her wand up her sleeve, gripping the holly handle tightly.

Finally, Madam Bones stepped forward.

"Alastor Moody—or not, actually," Amelia Bones began in a formal tone, "Whoever you are—you are under arrest for impersonation of and presumed kidnapping of Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody."

Charlotte's mother quickly added, her eyes narrowing, "I think you can add illegally entering a minor into the Tri-Wizard Tournament to that, Amelia."

Not-Moody gave her a skin-crawling smirk. "Very good, Mudblood. Very good."

Charlotte gasped, and then nearly groaned as her father spit that if Not-Moody ever called Lily Potter a Mudblood again, he'd hand Not-Moody over to the Dementors himself.

Why was it *always* the Defense teacher? Couldn't it be Snape, for once?

"And illegally entering a minor into the Tri-Wizard Tournament," Madam Bones repeated, voice dull with shock. When Charlotte looked up again, she and Shacklebolt looked fairly surprised, while Dumbledore and Charlotte's father . . .

"You bastard," her father snarled, rage twisting his features. "She's fourteen."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said sharply, any hint of the kindly wizard who gave students lemon drops long gone. "You may feel free to resist, whoever you are."

Madam Bones raised her wand, and pointed it at Not-Moody. Strangely enough, he laughed at that.

"Ah, I wouldn't do that, if I were you, Amelia," Not-Moody said tauntingly. His tongue flickered out from out the corner of his mouth and in again. Charlotte frowned at the mannerism; she'd never seen him do that before, and judging from Dumbledore's expression, it certainly wasn't normal. And, she noticed, it seemed that his previously long grizzled gray hair was starting to shorten.

Polyjuice, then, she realized. And it was wearing off. But it still didn't reveal *who* they were.

Suddenly, Not-Moody let out a pained groan, and bent over, grimacing as his face twisted and his features began to shift.

His hair lightened, and he grew taller and skinnier, the eye and leg popping out with sickening sounds. Once the transformation was complete, he stood up, his stance proud.

The scarred Auror with his false eye and wooden leg who had growled at all of them the importance of keeping their wits about them was gone.

In his place was a pale young man with straw-colored hair, freckles, and a crazed look that matched Quirrell's eyes when he had stood before the Mirror of Erised in Charlotte's First Year, demanding she hand over the Philosopher's Stone.

He couldn't have been older than Sirius.

"Barty Crouch Junior," Madame Bones breathed disbelievingly. "But—that's impossible. He *died.*"

Crouch gave her a wild grin. "You can chalk that one up to daddy dearest, Amelia."
Before Charlotte could do more than tighten her grip on her wand, Crouch reached into one of the pockets in his coat, pulled out a black powder and hurled it to the ground.

The world went pitch-black.

Then, she heard Crouch whisper something, and she heard a loud explosion. People began to scream. Charlotte heard a few sickening cracks as something made contact with the walls. Then, she heard Crouch whisper an incantation again, and she went flying backwards until she hit a table.

Charlotte slid to the ground, breathless. Her back, still not quite fully healed from the First Task, felt as if it were on fire. She took one ragged breath, winced, and then another as she collected herself.

*Breath, Potter. You can't do anything if you can't breathe.*

She had to find—someone, at least. Selfishly, she hoped the collisions had been anyone but someone she knew.

Charlotte winced as she reached for her feet, her body protesting as she discarded her heels. She adjusted her glasses, and reminded herself to breath slowly. *Just like the First Task,* she thought hysterically. Only instead of a dragon, she just had to watch for a lunatic. Easy.

As she staggered to her feet, Charlotte couldn't see anything, couldn't hear anything but people screaming out for each other. She couldn't even see the outline of her own hand as she waved it in front of her face. Thankfully, Charlotte hadn't lost her wand.

Charlotte whipped it out, and muttered, "Lumos."

Nothing happened.

"Lumos."

she repeated, slightly louder. Still, nothing happened, and Charlotte still couldn't see anything in the darkness. The screaming grew louder and more desperate in the blackness.

Charlotte shook her head in disbelief. She turned around in the direction she was pretty sure she'd come from, and began to walk. She'd just have to find someone, or a window, or—*something.*

Before she had moved a meter, she felt something brush her face roughly, and then was almost knocked over by something—hairy?

"Hey!" she said indignantly. She raised her wand, prepared for Crabbe or Goyle to take the opportunity to throw a punch.

"Charley? Is tha' you?"

Charlotte stopped dead, lowering her wand.

"Hagrid?" she said incredulously.

"Charley! I can’ see you. D'you know wha' happened?"

Despite the futility of the gesture, Charlotte shook her head. "No idea. Have you seen—run into anyone else?"

"No one but Olympe," Hagrid said gruffly. "I'm pretty sure I saw Dumbledore before everything went black, though. You okay, Charley? Idiot tha' did this didn't get you?"
Charlotte shook her head, before stopping as it throbbed. "I'm fine."

"Good. Now, I thin' I saw Dumbledore this way..."

After running flat into Madame Maxime with several English and French apologies, Charlotte followed Hagrid in what she was pretty sure was one direction. With her feet bare, and her eyes useless, she felt very vulnerable. It didn't help that she was constantly brushing past—or running into—furniture and people. At least, she was pretty sure most of them were people.

Thankfully, with Hagrid continually grunting out apologies for whenever he inevitably hit someone, and calling out for Professor Dumbledore, they eventually found his general location.

"Albus!" Hagrid called out. "Y'there?"

"I am here, Hagrid—though, admittedly, I am currently not entirely sure as to where here is," Dumbledore replied, his voice a mixture of amusement and chagrin. "Do you have anyone with you?"

"Yes, sir," Hagrid replied, "Olympe and Miss Potter are with me."

"Ah, excellent. I had hoped you would be alright, Olympe, and am quite happy you made it through as well, Charlotte. Merlin knows your father was rather beside himself."

"Dad?" Charlotte asked curiously. "Are you there?"

James Potter responded almost before Charlotte finished speaking. "Charlotte? Are you there? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said quickly, not bothering to bite back a pleased smile. "But what happened? One moment it looked like Madame Bones was about to arrest—Crouch, she said his name was, right? Then, I couldn't see anything and everyone went flying."

"The darkness was Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder," her father explained, "Voldemort's followers, being rich gits, sometimes imported the stuff during the war to use. Crouch must have gotten his hands on it somehow. It's restricted to import if you're not a business, so Amelia will probably have to look how he got it in the first place. After that, he quite literally blasted his way out of here. And then everyone else, for good measure."

"Where is he now?" Charlotte asked curiously. She had begun to relax her grip on her wand as she talked to her father, and had almost dropped it when she realized she could begin to see the vague outline of people in front of her. Professor Dumbledore and her father, she was pretty sure, were, in fact, only a meter in front her, slightly to her left.

"He ran for it. Amelia, Shacklebolt, and your mother went after him, and Dumbledore and I stayed to hold down the fort, and help everyone once we get our eyes back. Bastard packed a punch," he added ruefully, rubbing his left shoulder.

Experimentally, Charlotte took off her glasses, and winced at the sudden addition of color and shapes to the world. She pointed her wand at her frames, muttering, "Scourgify."

She put her glasses on, and winced at the sight that greeted her. Her previously white and cream dress was now gray and black, with a tattered hem to boot, and her feet looked like they'd been through a war zone. Everywhere around her, she looked, actually looked rather greyer than beforehand.
Charlotte!

At the sound of Neville yelling her name, she spun around, before freezing at what she saw. Hermione Granger, crumpled on the floor.

Heedless of the shattered glass she could now see, Charlotte ran across the floor to her best friends. Quickly, she helped Neville levitate her onto a cleaner part of the dance floor.

"Where's Madam Pomfrey?" she asked as she inspected the vicious-looking bloody slash across Hermione's forehead.

"Faye shattered her knee, and Cedric Diggory was vomiting up blood," Neville said breathlessly. "We'll have to, do you know how to..."

"But, this is, I only know Episkey, Neville, and this is...I don't know how to fix it, Neville." Charlotte trailed off, feeling incredibly useless.

Her mother would have known, Charlotte thought distantly as she bit her lip. She had been a Healer during the war, and a good one, according to her father. Of course, at the time, he had followed it up with a comment about her being a better dueler, but that didn't help Charlotte now.

She shook her head helplessly. She didn't even have a gut instinct to go off of here, and Hermione just kept laying there. It was wrong.

Charlotte had been stabbed by a Basilisk's fang, but it didn't compare to seeing Hermione Granger hurt and not knowing what to do.

"Vulnera Sanentur."

Charlotte looked up from where she was kneeling, to seeing Viktor towering over her. The hard knot of nausea and worry and helpless anger in her chest only increased when she saw the dark purple bruise on his cheek. "Viktor?"

"Vulnera Sanentur," he repeated. "Repeat it thrice, it will fix her injury."

Charlotte stared at him for a second before nodding. Neville was already by Hermione's head, pointing his unshaking wand at the wound.

"Right," he whispered, "Vulnera Sanentur. Vulnera Sanentur. Vulnera Sanentur."

For a long, sickening, moment, nothing happened.

"Come on, Hermione," Charlotte encouraged.

For another moment, Charlotte worried that the spell wouldn't work. Then, she saw, the angry slash began to shrink, bit by bit. The blood already lost remained, but the wound soon disappeared, leaving only pink, new skin on Hermione's forehead.

Much to Charlotte's relief, Hermione then let out a low groan, rolling over right onto Neville. He, thankfully, didn't even turn pink at her head on his lap, but helped to slowly ease her up into an upright position as she awoke.

With a grateful sigh, Charlotte stood up and turned to her ragged-looking date. "Thank you. I—"
know she probably would have been okay, but, she's one of my best friends. Thank you."

"Your feet are bare," Viktor noted, instead of saying that she was welcome.

Charlotte nodded with a confused smile. "I wasn't getting anywhere with my heels, and I had to find. . .them."

She gestured helplessly to her best friends, as Neville helped a woozy-looking Hermione to her feet and over to an intact chair.

For a moment, neither said anything, as they studied each other, before Viktor nodded decisively. "You are very welcome, Charlotte."

Charlotte didn't bother trying to decipher why he said it. She went to sit with Neville and Hermione, but before she could even sit down, she heard a spine-chilling yell.

"LILY!"

Her father's yell, Charlotte realized. She suddenly scanned the Great Hall for Dumbledore or her father. They weren't there. She also looked to see if her mother was there.

She looked for her mother, who had gone after. . .

_Him._

"No." she whispered. "Please."

Charlotte ran back across the shattered glass and empty dance floor.

_Please. I only just got them back. Please, no. Not either of them. Please._

Chapter End Notes

_A/N: Soooo... actual sorta-new plot stuff?_  
And I'm not dead! Sorry 'bout that.

Also, in other news, I will be finally getting myself an update schedule I think is actually doable for me: updates for this and any other WIPs will be on the first of every month. Random other nonsense may be published in between, but that's it.

In between, I have joined the great exodus to Dreamwidth, _where I've now set up an account_, where I'll be posting stuff about my writing and general meta. Check it out if you want!
Charlotte had never been in St. Mungo's before. It had been an interesting experience, she supposed; she never would have guessed the magical hospital would be hidden in an abandoned department store in London, or that Healers wore lime green robes, unlike their Muggle counterparts, and seeing Lockhart, still without any of his memories, had given her a brief dose of vicious glee.

Charlotte wished she had never step a single foot in the place.

As she stared obsessively at her mother's too-still, pale face, willing Lily Potter to wake up already, Charlotte tried to figure out how an evening that had been surprisingly enjoyable had quickly turned into a warped nightmare.

Charlotte ran into the Entrance Hall after her father and stopped dead at what she saw. Her mother was on the floor, red hair fanned out around her. She was barely breathing. Charlotte could see the blood pooling on the floor from where she stood, frozen. Her feet were torn to shreds, she knew; she couldn't feel the pain at all. Locks of her coal-black hair were falling in front of her face; it was if they weren't there at all.

All that mattered was her mother.

Her father, helped by Madame Bones, muttered incantations under his breath while Auror Shacklebolt spoke to what looked like a Patronus of a lynx before it disappeared out of the Entrance Hall and into the night.

Charlotte could see her mother start to take slightly deeper breaths, her skin visibly clammy and beginning to sweat.

Finally, as her father continued to clutch her mother's hand, his hazel eyes never leaving her face, Madame Bones stood up, her jaw set as she walked over to Charlotte. Distantly, Charlotte noted the bloody cut across the bridge of her nose, and the sleeve of her dress that looked like it had been ripped off.

"I am terribly sorry," she said, her voice gentle, "Your mother was hit with the Intra Contundo Curse, and is suffering from internal bleeding. Kingsley has sent for Healers from St. Mungo's."

Charlotte took a shuddering breath at the memory, and her eyes stung.
Her mother wasn't dead, she wouldn't cry. She wouldn't.

She tried to inhale again, only to be forced to blow her nose.

Her father had suggested she try and get some sleep, but Charlotte wasn't sure she could.

Sirius had come running to the hospital with comfortable Muggle clothes for her and her father, but she was still tired, with her makeup starting to run, and her back protesting every breath she took; every time she closed her eyes, she saw Hermione on the floor bleeding, and heard her father screaming.

But it was one in the morning, and Charlotte sure as hell wasn't leaving her mother before she woke up. She also most certainly wasn't going to get anything done while waiting.

"Oh, may as well try," she muttered. Charlotte stood up from the foot of Lily Potter's bed to drag over the cot Healer Agwu had conjured up for the young Gryffindor, his dark eyes far too knowing and compassionate for Charlotte's liking.

Charlotte cautiously curled herself up on her side, wincing as her muscles complained, and closed her eyes. Thankfully, she couldn't hear anything but her own heartbeat, and the hum of the spells monitoring Lily Potter.

She was beginning to contemplate removing her glasses as the frames digging into her right temple, when she heard the door to the room open.

"...Thankfully, we arrived in time to minimize long-term damage. Your wife will not be here for long, Lord Potter," Healer Agwu explained in a voice tinged with relief.

"Careful, Charlotte's asleep," her father whispered quietly. Charlotte worked to keep her breathing even, and her eyelids from reflexively snapping open. "And please call me James already. Lord Potter makes me feel as old as Dumbledore, and you saved Lily's life, Healer Agwu."

"Then you must call me Ezeudo."

"If you're done with the pleasantries, gentlemen?" Madame Bones snipped as Charlotte heard the tell-tale click of her heels.

"Of course, Amelia. You said you and Kingsley figured out how Crouch escaped?" As he spoke, Charlotte felt a weight press down on the edge of her cot, and felt his hand briefly clasp her ankle comfortingly.

"Yes. Crouch circled back to Moody's office, and somehow escaped through the fireplace before we could Stun him," Madame Bones explained after Healer Agwu checked on his patient and left, "It's been warded to hell and back so we have no clue where he went. At least, not without having the enchanters on hand who did it."

"But you have theories."

Madame Bones sighed frustratedly. "If Lucius Malfoy didn't have his fingers in this somehow, I'll resign as Head of the DMLE."

"Do you have any evidence?"

"I recognized the style of those wards, and I know of those wizards. There's only a handful of people in Britain with the money to hire them, and both of us know that Sirius Black would happily throw
himself from his broomstick before helping a Death Eater."

"You're sure Crouch was a Death Eater?"

"James, by the time Robards managed to get Barty Crouch Senior out from under the Imperius, he could barely remember his own name, and kept babbling about his dead wife. Only Death Eaters are capable of that kind of command of the Unforgivables."

"In England, at least," he said thoughtfully, "I've heard a few stories about Grindelwald's fanatics and their descendants on the Continent."

"True," Madame Bones agreed, "But did they bare the Dark Mark before hurling themselves into the Floo Network?"

Charlotte bit down on her lip so hard she tasted copper; her father swore softly under his breath.

"Do you think he's back, then?"

"I don't think he ever left, if I'm being honest; but as for a body?" Amelia Bones asked quietly, "I think everyone would know. Dumbledore certainly would, and I like to think he'd tell me."

"But you think Voldemort is definitely attempting to return."

"I don't think attempt is the right word here. I think he will, James," she explained, "You heard about the Quidditch Cup, the disappearance of Bertha Jorkins in Albania, that Muggle who was killed with the Killing Curse in Little Hangleton. If you want to go further back, there are all of the Defense professors, the Petrifications in Hogwarts, Peter Pettigrew. The last time Lucius Malfoy looked as smug as he has the past couple months, we were dueling twice a week."

Charlotte absentmindedly wondered if Madame Bones was responsible for the scar on Lucius Malfoy's face as she reminded herself how to breathe.

"And, of course, there's your daughter," Amelia Bones continued, "It's the beginning of the first war all over again, James. I don't think we can stop it before it's begun, because it already has."

For a moment, neither of them spoke, and Charlotte focused on breathing through her raw panic. Madame Bones's words had been confirmation of the fears she'd refused to voice to Neville and Hermione since the moment her name had come out of the Goblet: Voldemort was after her. Again.

And if Madame Bones was right, she wouldn't be dealing with a diary-Riddle, or Voldemort sticking out of the back of a teacher's head. The man who single-handedly almost destroyed British magical society, at full strength.

And who would almost definitely be trying to kill her, and everyone she loved.

"Right," James Potter said at last, terse and angry. "That settles it, then. The second Lily wakes up, I'm going to tell her what you told me, and then I'm going to talk to Albus Dumbledore about that bloody prophecy, and settle that matter once and for all."

What prophecy?

"What prophecy?" Madame Bones asked suspiciously.

"There's a prophecy that names Charlotte as the only person who can defeat Voldemort. Supposedly," Charlotte's father said derisively, "It's in the Department of Mysteries. I've seen it. It's
why Lily and I went into hiding. Well, that and the fact that every time we beat up one of his Death Eaters, we came much closer to making Voldemort's face finally gain some color."

What.

A prophecy? About her and Voldemort?

Charlotte could barely escape with her life when she ran into a memory of him; now she was expected to actually fight the real him?

It had to be wrong. Her father had to be wrong. There was absolutely no way that she, Charlotte Potter, was expected to fight the most powerful Dark wizard of all time.

It made no sense.

"A fourteen-year-old girl is going to defeat Voldemort?" Madame Bones asked disbelievingly, voicing Charlotte's thoughts, "I barely believed the Girl-Who-Lived nonsense in the first place. James, I know it's been joked about before, but has seriously Dumbledore lost his many marbles this time?"

He growled in frustration. "Amelia, all I know is that prophecy was dutifully logged as a real prophecy, and that this interpretation wasn't come up with immediately. The Unspeakable in charge of the Hall of Prophecies at the time considered it the most likely theory, especially considering she fulfilled the prophecy requirements best; she was the only witch born on the thirty-first of July that year. Dumbledore only considered it, but once it was confirmed by the Unspeakable and Voldemort believed it, he ran with it."

Charlotte felt her father's weight lift off the cot, and she heard him begin to pace. "Regardless, Amelia, I don't care if Merlin himself comes back from the dead and tells us the prophecy is true. Charlotte is facing Voldemort over my dead body."

"Look, we should probably actually find the man and talk," Madame Bones said with a sigh, "Theorizing won't get us anywhere. For all we know, maybe it turned out to be a false prophecy."

James Potter sighed, but finally agreed as he dimmed the lights in the room. "Fine."

She hadn't sounded particularly hopeful, Charlotte reflected as she heard her father and Amelia Bones walk out the room, leaving her and her mother alone.

A prophecy. Bloody hell.

And I thought being the Girl-Who-Lived was bad enough, Charlotte thought bitterly as sleep finally began to tug at the edges of her consciousness. She willingly succumbed, hoping to forget about any gods-damned prophecies for a while.

When Charlotte came to some time later, her neck hurt something awful, but her headache had at least gone. As she slowly sat up in the dim room with a groan, she felt as if she was forgetting something.

It was only after lighting her wand she remembered, tightening her grip on her wand to the point of pain.

Oh. Right. The prophecy.
The memory of the conversation between her father and Amelia Bones flooded back, and Charlotte felt sick all over again. The thought that, after trying to lead some semblance of her own life for so long, her entire life was in fact one lead-up to a final battle with fucking Voldemort, was absolutely whimper-inducing terrifying.

Before she got too far, however, she saw an unfortunately familiar face from the ball.

"Greengrass," Charlotte said tersely as she walked by. Oddly, Hector Greengrass looked confused at her appearance.

"Potter? What are you doing here?"

"Looking for Neverland," she said sarcastically, before she realized that reference would probably fly over his head.

Predictably, he gave a confused, albeit patronizing look. "If this 'Neverland' involves you leaving the immediately vicinity, I will gladly help you in your ridiculous endeavors for once—"

"Well, well, well. Potter and Greengrass, what a surprise." The smug drawl cutting off Greengrass left Charlotte wishing she had never left the room.

"Malfoy, what are you doing here?" she snapped.

Infuriatingly, Malfoy only smirked, looking as if he were fresh off of a full night's sleep, and not as if he had been at anyone's bedside. "Why, I thought you'd be grateful for my company, Potter."

"Grateful?" she sputtered.

"Grateful. You see, I came to see you were finally brought low to the level of other riff-raff, to see if you finally recognized how much a jumped-up little girl you really were—"

"Get to the point, Malfoy," Greengrass said, bored. "Some of us don't have all night to entertain Miss Potter's antics."

"Fine, Greengrass," he huffed. "Well, Potter, after I heard how you'd been left all alone with your Mudblood mother—"

Charlotte didn't bother with her wand.

There were some things even magic couldn't improve.

Her knuckles stung, but the satisfying crunch of Malfoy's nose made the pain more than worth it.

As did the sight of him clutching his bloody nose, looking at her in shock.

"You'll regret that young lady!" one portrait of a hook-nosed healer said indignantly. "Violence in St. Mungo's! The nerve!"

Charlotte fixed the portrait with the coldest look she could muster. "He shouldn't have the nerve to insult my family."

Another portrait, this one of a beady-eyed lady with bright red hair, nodded approvingly. "Do shut up, Aurelius."

"I'd recommend aiming for the jaw next time, though, miss," her blond-haired neighbor suggested, his eyes sharp, "It'll shut him up for longer."
Aurelius sputtered at this, but said nothing else as Malfoy pointed his finger at Charlotte. "You dare
to attack me, Potter? Do you really think that a little bitch like you could get away with this—"

"I think I'm taller than you, actually," Charlotte interrupted. Malfoy turned even redder, and rounded
on a smirking Greengrass, who had silently watched the entire exchange.

"And you! Don't think my father, or your parents, won't hear about this!" he ranted, "To think, that
families like yours are so sullied that—"

"Sod off, Malfoy," Charlotte and Greengrass said in unison, before looking at each other, eyes wide.
Malfoy didn't seem entirely sure what to say to this, and he was beginning to drip blood on the floor,
and so stalked off away from Charlotte and Greengrass.

As Malfoy rounded a corner, Charlotte saw Healer Agwu walk past her, after him. He threw a
reproving look in Charlotte's direction, but she couldn't particularly bring herself to care.

She still remembered too well what it had been like for Hermione Second Year.

"Quite the temper you have there, Potter," Greengrass commented. Surprisingly, there was no nasty
undertone to his words, or hidden insult Charlotte could decipher. It seemed...neutral. "And quite
the punch."

Charlotte looked at him confusedly, wondering he was feeling fine. "Thanks, I suppose...I thought
you and he were friends, though."

Now Greengrass looked at her if she had gone mad, and scoffed. "Friends? Friends? Me and Draco
Malfoy, friends?"

Charlotte raised her eyebrows, feeling as if she had entered the twilight zone. "That's a no, then."

"We are friends in that only in that Lord Malfoy is publicly pushing for a match between him and my
little sister," he said, his tone too careful. "And has been for the past two years."

Charlotte frowned as a dim memory from last year, of Neville excitedly telling her about a Slytherin
hatstall, and rumors the girl had been considered for Gryffindor. "Your sister...isn't she—"

"Astoria's twelve," Greengrass said shortly. Charlotte nodded, and before she could stop herself,
asked, "Is she why you and Malfoy are here, then?"

"Why would I tell you, Potter?" Greengrass sneered. "For all I know, you would just go and blab
about it to your little circle of misfits."

"You told me about Malfoy," Charlotte pointed out. And, for some reason she couldn't quite fathom
—maybe it was the fact that it had easily been ten minutes and Sally Smith was nowhere in sight,
maybe it was the fact she recognized the defensive born from knowing no one truly had your back—
Charlotte added quietly, quickly, "I'm here for my mother. She got hit by a curse from the impostor
professor."

Greengrass inhaled. "Defense?"

"Who else?"

"Your fault?"

"Why do you assume it's mine?"
He fixed her with another patronizing stare. "Because it always is."

"It's not my fault that no one else ever bothers to fix things around here," Charlotte snapped. "Or that everyone is like you and Malfoy, taking advantage of it because you claim your blood is purer than everyone else's!"

"I'm not like Draco Malfoy," Greengrass snapped back, his veneer cracking for the first time. "And if you insist on knowing my business, Miss Potter, I am, in fact, here for Astoria, considering the bastard pretending to be Mad-Eye Moody threw her into a wall, and she's moon-cursed in her blood!"

There was nothing that Charlotte could say to that, as Greengrass turned around and stalked off in the exact same fashion as Malfoy had, minus the broken nose.

Being moon-cursed, Charlotte remembered from one of Moony's patient explanations of lycanthropy, was something not exclusive to werewolves. Tying a curse to the cycle of the moon had been a common enough thing back in the Dark Ages, and it ensured the spell would be passed down through the maternal line of a family, promising vengeance for generations.

And, she knew all too well, the full moon had been less than a week ago.

Charlotte watched Hector Greengrass walk away, something uncomfortably close to pity curling in her chest. She shook her head and began to walk back to where her mother was.

Charlotte walked into the quiet room, and carefully closed the door behind her; unsurprisingly, she saw that her father was sitting with her mother. Oddly, she could see a bruise forming on his cheek from where she stood. What happened? Did it have to do with the prophecy?

She would ask in the morning about the prophecy, she decided. She wanted a few more hours of pretending this could all be solved by her parents, and to talk to Professor Dumbledore.

Gods, she wanted Neville and Hermione more than anything in the world right now.

"You should get some sleep, Charlotte," her father said softly, as she sat down beside him, "It's going to be a long night."

"You'll stay?" she whispered as she cautiously leaned against his shoulder.

He nodded, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled fondly. "Always, Prongslet."

Charlotte's lips quirked at the nickname. "Wake me up when she does, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Charlotte took off her glasses this time, and barely a minute passed before she drifted off, her parents at her side.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: For anyone who cares, the Intra Contundo Curse was the same curse Hermione was hit with in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries in OotP. It didn't have a name.
in canon, so I butchered some Latin to give it one. Bit of a shorter chapter, but I think it still packed a punch. Let me know what you thought!

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