Holly at Hogwarts, a Fairy Tale

by Forest of Holly

Summary

It's another year for Holly and her friends. The Hogwarts Express takes off and arrives as usual but professors are missing! Or are they?

Notes

for Amanda Alice.

Also, for sweet Jenny who will never again purr with pure bliss while nuzzling my neck; we miss her.
Chapter 1

Once upon a time there was a beautiful Princess with smooth olive skin, silky long wavy black hair, and big beautiful brown eyes. She lived with her mother and father in a castle on the hill. One sad day the Princess’ father died. So the Princess, scarcely a toddler at the time, and her mother went to live with the Princess’ grandmother (the Princess’ mother’s mum) in a very large castle hidden within a deep dark forest. They lived together for many years. But then a terrible accident occurred killing the Princess’ mother leaving the Princess alone with her Grandmum. The Princess was very sad.

Mrs. Paige Brenna Crowley reached out and picked up a box from the table. It was one of several parcels, of varying shapes and sizes, placed on the table, some more flamboyantly decorated than others, all wedding gifts. Paige and her husband Tom Richards had chosen to hold their reception in The Green and Gold, Tom’s new shop, one that catered to a strictly Slytherin clientele. It was an opportunity to celebrate and showcase all their products. As a reception, the event had been a smashing success. No doubt the open (Slytherins only) invitations, free food, drink and musical entertainment had much to do with attendance. Everyone who was anyone Slytherin and everyone else Slytherin had attended. Paige was glad she had taken the time to install some temporary room extending spells to the shop to accommodate all the guests. Hopefully those who came would return as customers…

The formal wedding reception for Slytherins that she and Tom had held had mostly ended. While Tom was deep in conversation with some of the more prominent Slytherin elders discussing business matters, Paige decided to open the wedding gifts.

The gift in her hand came in a small plain white box. A slender lime green ribbon neatly tied in a bow held the box closed. There were no markings of any sort on the box. Paige easily slid off the ribbon with one hand and then opened the box. A plain piece of folded parchment, edged in clover green, covered the item(s) inside. Paige removed the parchment and looked at the gift. It appeared to be a circular fibula, or brooch, perhaps 5 centimeters in diameter. The burnished colour suggested the brooch was made of bronze; Paige easily recognized the design of the brooch as a Celtic knot—more accurately a “Lover’s” knot.

“Appropriate,” she thought approvingly while she unfolded the note with her other hand. “I can use it to pin my spidersilk scarf in place…” Paige glanced at the words and froze! Her blood chilled as she read the message within.

“Use it well.” There was no signature but none was necessary as Paige easily recognized the handwriting: Auntie “D.!”

“DeWitt!” Paige called out keeping her voice deliberately calm.

“Yes mum?” answered Roland DeWitt in a respectful voice as he stopped sweeping and came over to her. That was as it should be; he was on the clock… Roland DeWitt was employed as the store clerk in Tom’s shop and had been retained to help before, during and after the reception.

Wordlessly Paige handed DeWitt the note. He read the words and then looked at Paige. “Umbridge?” he asked bluntly no longer obsequiously polite. She nodded. DeWitt shrugged. “Well, she’s not here now,” he declared aloud and, lifting his broom, turned to leave.

“You’re not surprised?” questioned Paige.

Her words stopped DeWitt. He turned and looked again at Paige. “No,” he answered simply. Paige waited so DeWitt went on. “Given all the Slytherins who came today, I’d be surprised if she hadn’t come.”

“And you didn’t say anything?” questioned Paige accusingly.
“To whom?” replied DeWitt. “To the Ministry?” Aunty D. had escaped from Azkaban three years earlier and was still a fugitive. “I didn’t spot her,” continued DeWitt, “so she had to be in disguise and probably had an escape route all planned out. The Ministry would have looked like a fool had they come in here interrupting your party hunting for her. So I did what I could to protect you instead.”

He had? Paige lifted an eyebrow. “Oh?” she questioned aloud. DeWitt was also an auror on assignment to support Paige should Umbridge come by. It was totally unnecessary as far as Paige was concerned; she was perfectly capable of protecting herself. Paige would have objected strenuously to permitting a Ministry “plant” within Tom’s store, but good help was hard to find; DeWitt was not only “good,” but “cheap,” an unbeatable combination.

“What did you do?” questioned Paige curiously.

“Watched the food like a hawk,” DeWitt began. DeWitt no doubt knew that Auntie D. had once trapped Paige by doctoring her food. He probably didn’t know that, once freed of Auntie D.’s influence, Paige never ate anything from questionable sources or in places where the food could be doctored. Paige had gotten very good at avoiding food in public. The practice had done wonders for her figure.

Paige had found it fairly easy to avoid eating at the reception; the stemware and dishes tended to snap and break in her fingertips—obviously shoddy material. Anthony (Tom’s little brother) had been in charge of supplies and decorations for the reception; Paige intended to talk with him later about the difference between getting a good deal and getting cheated.

“….and put a Spell Jinx on all the glassware and dishes,” continued DeWitt informatively.

“Spell Jinx?” questioned Paige. She’d never heard of a Spell Jinx.

“Yeah, I modified the hair jinx you used against Potter only made it “spells” not “Potter” drawn to the dishes…”

Paige could feel her face warm with the mention of that hair jinx. Auntie D. had made her cast it and in doing so, nearly destroyed all Paige’s own career plans. Paige shoved the memory aside and focused on what DeWitt just said. Was it possible Anthony hadn’t been cheated? That the broken glass was the result of spells going awry? “You mean all that breaking glass wasn’t just shoddy material?”

“Yep!” answered DeWitt cheerfully. “In fact, the spell works best on the good stuff.”

“But who?”

“Couldn’t peg the source,” replied DeWitt regretfully, “but the jinx didn’t have much of a range. Judging from the amount of glass that broke around you, I’d say it’s a good chance you were the intended target.”

“Me?” echoed Paige softly. “Auntie D.?”

“Possibly, but I wouldn’t think she’d be so public in her activities.”

“It was a Slytherin event,” reminded Paige crisply. She’d never invite the general public to her reception!

“True,” agreed DeWitt thoughtfully, “but still… May I?” he asked reaching for the contents of the box.

Paige nodded absently. Auntie D. had bewitched her as part of a plan to get a key. The key was long gone and so, surely, was Auntie’s bewitching interest in her…

DeWitt removed the brooch from the box and placed the note back in. “Can’t imagine Umbridge giving you such a pricey gift if she intended something sinister,” commented DeWitt thoughtfully as he studied the brooch.

“Pricy?” questioned Paige in surprise. At most, the knot was bronze and perhaps of value because it was an antique…

Paige watched while DeWitt turned the brooch over and placed his fingers on the clasp. He twisted and the brooch seemed to blur beneath his fingers. After a moment DeWitt held the brooch up for Paige’s inspection. To her surprise, the design was no longer a “Lover’s” Knot. Paige recognized the new design as a “Sailor’s” knot, also Celtic. “I thought I recognized Larry’s work, or his dad’s,” said DeWitt with satisfaction and he gave the clasp another twist.
“It’s a weekly brooch,” explained DeWitt as the “Sailor’s” knot morphed into a new design, a “Shield” knot, in front of Paige’s eyes. “Four turns to the right; four different designs. Four turns to the left; same thing…” DeWitt twisted the clasp again.

“Why haven’t I heard of such things?” questioned Paige as she watched the brooch morph yet again, this time into a “Solomon’s” knot, one of the oldest symbols found in stone-aged carvings.

“No reason to,” replied DeWitt matter-of-factly. “This kind of jewelry is by commission only, very exclusive, and never sold on the public market. It’s an heirloom item handed down from family member to family member. “You try…” he suggested while handing the brooch to Paige. “One quarter turn at a time.”

“Auntie D. commissioned this?” Paige questioned as she examined the brooch in her hands. The burnished sides of the knot gleamed in the light.

“Ah, probably not,” answered DeWitt hesitantly. Paige looked up at him expectantly. DeWitt continued. “She’s not known for paying this kind of money for anything. More likely she, uh, appropriated it somehow. I twisted to the right,” DeWitt informed Paige changing the subject. “Why don’t you see what happens if you twist to the left.”

“Appropriated?” persisted Paige as she took hold of the clasp and twisted to the left. It took more effort than she expected to get the movement started. Then the clasp stopped after one-quarter turn, lodging in some sort of notch.

“I, ah, made inquiries after what happened to you and Holly,” admitted DeWitt with reluctance. The brooch heated up in Paige’s hand and the strands of the knotted design twisted into a new form.

“Oh?” Paige didn’t recognize the new design but it was as intricate as the others.

“Yeah, it seems that, Uh—, ah, your aunt had a habit of acquiring items in exchange for, ah, favors…”

“So?” Paige twisted yet again.

“Ah, sometimes accepted things for looking the, ah, other way…” DeWitt added reluctantly as a new design formed in Paige’s hand.

“So? Bribes are just an exchange of goods for services in which both parties walk away satisfied,” observed Paige firmly. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Not always,” countered DeWitt. “Some say she used her position to her advantage and made up infractions in order to get something that caught her eye…”

“Why not?” argued Paige. “Why hold a position in the Ministry if you can’t use it to your advantage? There are only seven days in a week,” she added thoughtfully as she twisted the clasp a third time. “But you said there are eight turns…”

“The eighth is supposed to be a bumble bee,” informed DeWitt as the form of a “Celtic Triquetra” or a “Celtic Trinity” knot formed in Paige’s hand.

“Bumble bee?” questioned Paige in disbelief. Seven beautiful Celtic knots and then a bumble bee design? That didn’t make sense.


“If you’ve never seen one before, how did you know this is a weekly brooch?” questioned Paige as she tightened her grip on the clasp.

“Told you, I recognized the craftsmanship,” replied DeWitt. “Larry makes the best! And looking like a brooch as it did, it could only be one thing.”

Paige twisted the clasp. “Oh!” she exclaimed in surprise as she felt a sharp pinprick on the tip of her thumb. Paige dropped the brooch in surprise and immediately inspected her thumb. A tiny drop of blood welled up from the injury.


“And you didn’t warn me?” accused Paige after she cleaned off her thumb.

“I wanted to see if it did anything else,” replied DeWitt without guilt. He reached down and
picked up the brooch. “Well, well, well,” he added approvingly. “Maybe Umbridge did commission it! Or else she paid a lot to have this properly cleaned and reset for a new owner... And now I know why it’s Larry who makes ‘em.” He handed the brooch back to Paige. Only, it wasn’t a brooch any more but a shiny bronze key. Or, rather, a brooch in the shape of a key.

“I’d wager only the owner can get the key,” DeWitt added confidentially while Paige turned the key over. There was the familiar clasp in back. “And anyone else who makes that eighth turn just gets stung!”

“What’s it go to?” Paige asked as she stared at the key. She resolved to learn more about this “Larry.”

“Don’t know,” answered DeWitt bluntly. “Depends on what you need, but Larry’s keys are always good.” Abruptly DeWitt straightened. “Is there anything else, mum?” he asked in a proper deferential employee voice. Paige looked up. Tom was coming over. Tom didn’t know DeWitt was also an auror.

“No,” she answered while giving the clasp a quick twist to the right. Tom didn’t need to know about the key either, not yet anyway.

“Then I’d best return to sweeping,” DeWitt said and started away.

Paige could feel the brooch warm in her hand as it reformed. “DeWitt?” she called suddenly stopping him in his tracks. “Yes, mum?” he asked looking at her expectantly.

Paige swiftly dropped the forming brooch into its box, replaced the lid and held out the box to DeWitt. “Look into the background of this,” she ordered. “If something less than proper was done to obtain it, then make it right.” Paige had a sudden vision of being served an arrest warrant for receiving stolen goods and Auntie D. wanting a favor to “fix” things... “Perhaps some potions or other services could smooth things over if necessary,” she continued thoughtfully. “I want a proper bill of sale linking this brooch to me.”

“Yes, mum,” said DeWitt while taking the box. “I’ll get back to you on that,” he added. He slipped the box into his pocket and walked off.

Ordinarily, DeWitt would never obey any order of Paige’s that didn’t pertain to employment within the shop but this time he would. That box contained the first tangible lead to Auntie D.’s whereabouts since her escape. Thomas (Head of Magical Law Enforcement) would want it checked out thoroughly. Paige’s order had given DeWitt the excuse to do just that without connecting him or his questions to the Ministry. The investigation would yield nothing of use concerning Auntie D.’s location; Auntie D. was an extremely careful person. But it would tell Paige whether the gift was truly a “gift” or part of another “set-up” of some sort. In addition, DeWitt’s efforts on her behalf would gain Paige the goodwill of the Hufflepuff community for “trying to make it right,” and perhaps enable Paige to meet the very talented “Larry.”

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“Hey Jane, how’s it going?” questioned Greg cheerfully as he slid into the limo next to Holly.

“Just fine,” replied Holly Wycliff; she was “Jane Smith” to Greg. Something was off. “What’s wrong?” she asked bluntly.

“Nothing’s wrong!” denied Greg instantly. “What makes you think that?”

“Body language,” answered Holly briefly though in truth it was his emotions that didn’t add up. “What’s going on,” she repeated persistently.

“Man, you’re really good,” said Greg approvingly.

“And you’re stalling,” replied Holly. That time it was body language.

“Yeah, right,” admitted Greg. “Uh, would it be O.K. if we didn’t go to the concert tonight and went somewhere else instead? I’ll make it up to you later, I promise...”

“Where?” asked Holly cautiously.

“Um, a Ball? Lookit,” Greg continued in a rush. “I don’t know if you can dance or not or even if you want to, but there’s live music, I checked! And it’s really important!”

“Why?”
“It just is,” answered Greg vaguely. “I called, but I guess you didn’t get my message,” he added.

Holly sighed. She hadn’t gotten any message because she hadn’t the foggiest idea how to get messages off her cell phone; didn’t even turn it on unless to call Greg… “What’s it all about,” she asked.

“Well, I got this invite,” Greg began. “I was going to toss it seeing as you and I already had plans but then father saw it and he really wanted me to go to it instead…”

“Why?”

“Well, it’s kind of complicated but you see, ever since father got knighted, the rest of the Peerage community have kind of, well, ignored him…”

“They have?” Holly had no idea what happened within the world of knights and lords…

“Yeah. I don’t care but it really bothers father,” acknowledged Greg. “Frankly, it’s the first time anyone has ever included us in their functions… Father is certain it would be rude for me to not participate… So, what do you say… Will you go to a Ball instead?”

“What kind of ball?” asked Holly warily. There was only one Ball that she knew of and the odds of it being the same one were…

“Well, it’s a Debutante Ball…” answered Greg.

“Debutante?” echoed Holly in disbelief.

“Yeah, that’s where the eligible daughters are introduced to society…” Greg added explaining further. “I know it’s terribly old fashioned but that’s the Peerage for you…”

“Uh, surely something like that would have had invitations sent out ages ago,” said Holly carefully. There couldn’t be two such events on the same day…

“You’d think,” agreed Greg. “But ours didn’t arrive until yesterday… Father called the coordinator personally to make sure my RSVP was received…”


“Well, yeah,” replied Greg defensively. “He had to—That had to be done by yesterday! I couldn’t exactly tell him you don’t answer your phone; he’d think you’re ignoring us too… Besides, seeing as your cousin knows someone who knows the PM, father figured you’d already gotten an invite and were just being too polite to bring it up…”

“Oh. Can I see the invitation?”

“What? You don’t believe me?”

“Course I believe you,” replied Holly promptly. Greg positively oozed honesty. “But can I see the invitation anyway?”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Greg reluctantly reached into a pocket and pulled out a heavy cream colored card filled with embossed lettering. It looked very official and definitely specified an RSVP deadline of yesterday…

“Well,” asked Greg expectantly. His emotions told Holly that Greg truly wanted to go, or, rather, wanted to please his father, but she still wondered about the lateness of the arrival. That seemed fishy somehow…

“I guess,” Holly began reluctantly, “if it’s that important to your father…”

Greg brightened. “Thanks!” he said with obvious relief. “I really appreciate this.”

“Mmmm,” said Holly dubiously and added silently: “I think I’m gonna regret this…”

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Holly Wycliff stared apprehensively at the building that went with the address for the Ball that Greg had given the chauffeur. (Rupert Shunpike) It (the building) was positively huge and seemed to stretch out over a block in length. Holly had never seen such a place. To get there, Rupert had driven the limousine through a lane bordered on either side by thick stately beech trees. Beyond the trees were gently rolling green pastures that turned out to be a huge lawn filed with peacocks.
Holly hoped that the simple dress she had selected to wear to the concert with the short lace fingerless gloves (that hid her cricket tattoo) would not look too out of place at the ball. It was a ball for young people; surely they wouldn’t all be wearing formals! The limousine slid silently up to the curb and stopped. Holly studied the other guests anxiously while Rupert got out. She breathed a silent sigh of relief to note women wearing both short and long gowns. Perhaps her dress wasn’t as fine as theirs or her jewelry as expensive, but it would do.

Rupert walked over to the passenger side of the curb, opened the door and stood respectfully to one side as the two got out. “Have a nice evening,” he murmured as they passed.

“Thanks,” acknowledged Holly. Greg offered his arm; Holly slipped hers within the crook of his elbow and together the two walked up to the huge front doors.

“If you need something,” the doorman was saying, but Holly was already inside. The huge crystal chandelier lit the entryway. The cut glass prisms sparkled like diamonds. Strands of music came from an open door down the hall. People milled about in small groups. They glanced up briefly at Holly and Greg’s arrival and then returned to their own conversations without giving the two a second glance. Holly stared at the people matching the emotions she felt with bodies making sure the number matched. This was a Muggle event; there shouldn’t be any witches or wizards nearby but Holly checked anyway…

“Would you like something to drink?” Holly whirled at the sound and saw a young waitress with short curly brown hair holding out a tray of filled wine glasses.

Holly felt appreciation, need and desire coming from Greg; she gripped Greg’s arm tightly and pulled him back. “No, thank you,” she told the person while she pulled Greg away. Greg had an alcohol problem. It had never been an issue between them before as Holly didn’t drink but they had never been in places where alcohol was freely available.

“That was rude!” scolded Greg as he shook himself free from Holly’s grip. “I could have answered for myself!”

“And what would you have said?” replied Holly knowing full well what Greg was about to say.

“It was only one drink!” Greg protested.

“Which leads to another and another and another,” retorted Holly. “You’ve told me that time and time again, which is why you can’t start at all!”

“But I’m over that now!” Greg argued.

“You’re never over it!” disagreed Holly. That’s what her brother Vernon insisted—“Once a drunk, always a drunk!” he repeated whenever Greg’s name was mentioned. To him, Greg was “that drunk who ran you over!” Well, Greg had, but it had turned out O.K. “Look-it!” continued Holly. “I know you meant well trying to please your father and all, but this was a bad idea from the start and it’s not getting any better. We should get out of here before things get worse.”

“And admit defeat before really trying?” countered Greg. “I can’t do that! O.K., I slipped a bit,” he admitted. “But you stopped me. It won’t happen again. I promise!”

Holly sighed. Greg was totally sincere but she’d read that a promise from an alcoholic only lasted until the next glass showed up… On the other hand, if she hadn’t gotten Greg’s father the Knighthood, he wouldn’t be in this position; Holly felt an obligation to help make it work… “O.K.” she agreed reluctantly, “but if you break your promise and drink anything alcoholic tonight, it’ll be the last outing you and I ever go on together and I mean it!”

“Agreed,” said Greg cheerfully. “Now, what do you say we check out the music?” he added and moved down the hall towards the source of the sound. Holly followed and then stopped. “Uh, you go on ahead,” she told Greg. “I’ve something to do first.”
“What?”
“Uh, you were right,” Holly told Greg. “I was rude. I want to apologize first.”
“I’m sure you don’t have to do that,” Greg assured her. “You weren’t really rude; I was just saying that.”
“No, I could have handled things better. I’ll be right back.” Holly swiftly moved back and found the waitress with the tray of wine glasses. She whispered something in the waitress’ ear. The waitress smiled and whispered something back. Then Holly returned to Greg’s side.
“Feel better?” Greg asked.
“Much,” agreed Holly with a smile. “Let’s see those musicians!” Holly again hooked her arm around Greg’s and the two entered the room with the music.

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The Ballroom was huge! Maybe even larger than the Great Hall at Hogwarts but instead of rough hewn stone walls, the walls of this room gleamed sparkly white with more glass crystal chandeliers for lighting. The hardwood floor beneath positively shined. A graceful staircase, white steps, polished dark wood rails and a rich red carpet covering the center, arched down from the second floor. Two huge matching burgundy vases held pink and red roses on either side at the base of the staircase and more vases filled with flowers lined the edges of the steps.

A tiny stage had been erected at one end of the ballroom; eight musicians, an octet, with cellos, a bass and violins, performed a classical piece as background music. Along the wall were round tables with white lace tablecloths and flower centerpieces where the guests could sit. Many tables were already filled with people relaxing and chatting. Waiters and waitresses bustled about, some carrying trays of drinks and others with appetizers. Holly looked around scanning emotions. There were too many to count but she would have known instantly were any other witch or wizard present, unless that person was practicing Occlumency...

Greg looked about uncertainly. “I guess we ought to pick out a place to sit,” he suggested.
“That’s easy enough,” replied Holly in a cheerful voice. “This way.” She would have preferred two seats in back, but they were all full and unfortunately, there were two very obvious seats in front. Walking forward Holly led Greg to a tiny table directly across from the stairs—a location that could not be missed by anyone. The table was smaller than the rest and could only seat four. Though decorated the same as the rest, the small size made the table look out of place. “Look, you were expected!” Holly added as they neared. A placard, name card, actually, but one larger than any Holly had seen before, rested on a plate on the table. Greg’s name could be easily read even from a distance.

“How did you know?” asked Greg curiously as he picked up the card bearing his name.
“A hunch,” replied Holly. “There aren’t any other name cards…” she whispered.
“Huh?” Greg looked about curiously for himself. Indeed, none of the other tables had name cards. “So?”
“There was a reason why your invitation came so late,” Holly added. “They didn’t expect you to come.”
“Huh?”
“Your father was right. Despite the late notice, by not coming, it would be you ignoring the Peerage, not the other way around…” Holly could feel the anger grow within Greg. “Don’t be mad,” she hastened to add. “You came! So there’s no insult and no harm. But be careful, someone out there really wanted to—”
“What do you think you’re doing?” came an imperious voice. Both Holly and Greg turned to face a young man with brown hair and brown eyes.
“I’m sitting down,” replied Greg as he folded up the name card and tucked it into his pocket.
“Not there!” insisted the man. “That place is reserved for—”
“Gregory Smythe, I know,” replied Greg. “That’s why I’m sitting here!”
“You’re Smythe?” the man questioned in disbelief.
“Yeah. Want to see some I.D.?” Greg asked dryly. “Or will my invitation do?” Greg reached into his pocket, pulled out the cream colored card and held it out to the man…

“That’s not necessary,” the man said with ill grace without taking the card. “I was told you wouldn’t be attending…”

“Then you were mis-informed,” replied Greg stiffly. He returned the card to his pocket.

“Someone reserved us a seat in the very front,” added Holly in a cheerful voice. “Isn’t that great? Greg must be really important for them to do that for him.”

“Mmm,” replied the man disdainfully.

“I don’t see a second name card, though,” Holly added thoughtfully. “Where are you sitting?”

“Right here!” said the man firmly while sliding out a chair to sit in. “Like Smythe,” he added smoothly, “I removed my name card when I arrived…” The man lied. He told it well but Holly knew he lied because his emotions said so. Greg didn’t have Holly’s Empath advantages, but his (Greg’s) emotions were filled with “doubt” and “disbelief” so Holly guessed that Greg was fairly certain the man had told a lie as well. But neither of them challenged the lie—there was no point.

“Dear?” broke in a new voice. “What are you doing?” Holly looked up and saw a lady with flawless white skin in a sleeveless turquoise colored floor-length gown and matching above-elbow length gloves. An emerald pendant adorned her neck. The lady’s blonde hair was swept up high held in place with a green and blue jeweled hair piece and a single tendril of hair artfully swirled down on one side. The man abandoned his attempt to sit and stood back hastily from the chair at her arrival. “I thought you were going to—”

“Welcome Mr. Smythe to the Ball,” filled in the man. The lady stopped mid-sentence, sank into the chair the man had slid out and looked at Greg with new interest. “You look a little young to be a Knight…” she observed acidly.

“That’s my father,” filled in Greg without offense. “He’s not much for dancing and thought I would have more interest in a Debutante Ball…”

“Oh,” replied the lady. “And you are?” she added directimg her blue eyes at Holly.

“Miss Jane Smith,” answered Greg firmly for Holly. “I don’t believe I caught your name… either of you,” he added pointedly.

The man straightened and then spoke. “Montague--Hilbert John Bartholomew Montague the Third,” he said proudly. “And this is my wife, Vanessa.”

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Chapter 2

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“No wonder you looked familiar!” exclaimed Holly. “Weren’t you in the society page a while back?” Her brother Vernon had pointed the photo out and had told Holly his opinion of Montague at the same time… Holly had instantly recognized Montague from the photo the moment he had confronted Greg. Knowing what she knew about Montague, Holly was also fairly certain that Montague had found a way to delay the arrival of the invitation, probably in an attempt to embarrass Greg’s family somehow. It had been difficult to keep quiet but half a school year dealing with Slytherin bullies had taught Holly that confrontation would make things worse not better.

Montague puffed up a bit at the recognition. “I remember!” Holly added in an enthusiastic sounding voice. “It was an engagement photo! You looked positively lovely in it,” Holly added addressing Vanessa. And she had. Vanessa smiled in appreciation at the compliment. But looks weren’t everything. Vernon had gone on and told Holly how Vanessa had tried to blackmail Kenny and Holly realized that Vanessa was the Ibott who hired a thief to discredit Kenny and get him and Vernon expelled...

The smile left Vanessa’s eyes as she studied Holly. “Smith and Smythe,” she said dryly. “How droll! It doesn’t sound real!”

Greg stiffened.

“You’re right!” agreed Holly with a smile before Greg could speak. “That’s not my name at all. How clever of you to realize it.” Among other things, Vanessa and Montague were definitely both Slytherin types and Holly had learned much from watching the Ravenclaws at Hogwarts deflect Slytherin comments. Agreement could take the sting out of what otherwise was intended to be cutting remarks. Praise worked too.

Vanessa’s eyes widened in surprise. “And your real name would be?” she questioned.

“Jane Smith will do,” answered Holly firmly. “I like my privacy. Don’t you?” Holly paused momentarily letting Vanessa respond. It was one of those questions hard to disagree to. Time and time again Holly had seen the Ravenclaws manipulate the Slytherins into agreement when they never intended it. Vanessa nodded her head slightly and Holly quickly changed the subject, “Where did you go for your honeymoon?” she asked. “Was it someplace exotic?” Holly learned that Slytherins often liked to talk about themselves… It kept them from making nasty remarks or asking uncomfortable questions…

But Vanessa was not distracted. “Where did you go to school?” she asked instead.

“That’s private too,” replied Holly promptly. “Unlisted to keep it that way…”

“I don’t believe you!” Vanessa said flatly.

“That’s O.K. The truth does not require your belief to still be truth. What school did you go to?” persisted Holly. Another attempt to get Vanessa onto other topics.

Vanessa’s eyes narrowed. “No name? No school? That’s the best you could do?” she asked Greg disparagingly.

“Uh,” Greg was clearly at a loss for words but Holly could sense his outrage build at the insult. At the same time, Holly could sense anticipation from both Vanessa and Montague.

“Thank you,” Holly said quietly before Greg’s outrage could explode into words.

“Huh?” Both Vanessa and Greg stared at Holly in surprise.

“For sitting here,” Holly explained in a sincere voice. An angry retort was clearly what Vanessa wanted so it was not what Holly wanted. The Ravenclaws had deflected numerous taunts with a simple “Thank-you.” Coming up with viable reasons to appreciate Slytherin rudeness was challenging but not impossible. “You obviously prefer the company of other people yet you took the time to sit with us so we wouldn’t be alone,” Holly added with a straight face. “That was really thoughtful.”
“Dear, I think you may be a bit hard on the lad,” came the silky smooth voice of Montague. Vanessa looked up at him in surprise. “After all, Mr. Smythe is still new to our world and hasn’t had the advantage of someone making introductions and showing him the ropes, so to speak. And as for Miss Smith, I’m sure she’s gone to some school somewhere no matter how lacking in credentials and I must admit her attempt to interject some mystery has no doubt spiced up an otherwise drab relationship…”

Greg blinked a couple of times and then laughed. “ Seriously?” he questioned. “The mystery is the best part! I’d suggest you try it for yourself, if you weren’t already married…” Greg glanced at Vanessa as he spoke then continued. “And if I wanted to meet some stodgy girl with a proper pedigree, I wouldn’t need anyone to make introductions, I would have just come to this Ball alone and checked out all the debutantes!” Greg leaned over confidentially towards Montague. “If you want a word of advice, you and your wife could use a few lessons in manners. Mentioning all that in front of my date was really tacky… Makes me question the kind of schools you went to…” Both Vanessa and Montague went white with fury. Montague rose from his chair. “Careful,” warned Greg quickly in a low voice. “There are lots of cell phones about just waiting to catch a scene worthy of posting. No doubt you were hoping they would catch me saying or doing something embarrassing, but I’m sure they’ll think an angry outburst from you will do just as well…”

Montague sank quietly back into his chair. “How dare you insult us like that!” he hissed venomously.

“How dare you insult us!” retorted Greg. “Haven’t you got better things to do with your time?”

“ATTENTION ALL!” came a loud voice from the top of the stairs. All eyes turned in that direction. “PRESENTING ... MISS CHARLOTTE G—” A young woman dressed in white appeared at the top of the stairs. Her brown hair was twisted in an elaborate braided design and filled with tiny blue flowers. Her long white sleeveless sequined gown shimmered as she moved. Matching opera length (over the elbow) gloves covered her hands and arms. The fitted bodice accented Charlotte’s tiny waist and hips. The gown flared out below the hips just barely touching the floor. Dainty white shoes appeared from beneath the gown as Charlotte gracefully took each step down the stairs.

An older man dressed in a black full tuxedo stood at the base of the stairs. The announcer claimed that was Charlotte’s father. He took Charlotte’s hand and walked her proudly around the ballroom for all to view up close before taking Charlotte to a table where he slid out the chair for her and she sat.

MISS MONIQUE L—” Another young woman appeared at the top of the stairs. Her long white gown featured a single shoulder strap with a form fitting natural waistline, smooth front and a ruffled back and sides that flowed into a short train. Her red-brown hair was swept to one side and decorated with tiny white flowers. Monique stepped slowly down the stairs. Her father also greeted her at the base and took hold of her gloved hand. An attendant stepped forward and held up Monique’s train while the father and Monique walked proudly around the ballroom.

“MISS PHILIPPA R—” shouted the announcer after Monique had been seated. A new lady appeared at the top of the steps. Her breathtaking white full gown was made entirely of lace. Tiny seed pearls accented her lacy bodice. The gown flared out at the waist and the ruffle at the bottom made it look even fuller. The off the shoulder neckline showcased a string of white pearls adorning Philippa’s neck. More pearls decorated her flowing black hair. A line of seed pearls had been sewed up the length of her white opera gloves. Philippa’s uncle, wearing a light gray suit, met her at the bottom of the stairs. The two walked around the ballroom before sitting.

“MISS MIRANDA J—”

“Oh my god, she looks like death warmed over!” exclaimed Vanessa in a shocked undertone.

Like the rest, Miranda wore an all white gown. But it was a slim, form-fitting strapless gown that fit tightly around her body. Tiny iridescent beads were sewn into her bodice creating shimmering stripes of white that hugged her body like skeletal fingers. The gown flared out gently
above the knees. More beads were attached directly onto each shoulder in an intricate pattern. From the beads on her shoulder flowed a shimmering gossamer cape filled with bright silver lines resembling cobwebs. Lacy white opera gloves completed the ensemble. Miranda’s straight black hair hung loose over her shoulders. Her skin appeared unnaturally white; dark purple makeup rimmed her eyes and her lips had a purplish hue as well.

“She does!” agreed Montague disdainfully.

“Are those **boots**?” whispered Vanessa in horror as Miranda took her first steps.

“They look like combat boots,” agreed Montague. “But I’ve never seen white ones before…”

“Where on earth did she find them?”

“The morgue?” snickered Montague.

“It’s a disgrace!” declared Vanessa righteously. “She should have never been permitted to participate looking like that!”

“Like what?” asked Holly innocently. “I mean she’s wearing all white like the others.”

“There’s white and there’s white!” exclaimed Vanessa scandalized. “Look at her! She gives new meaning to the term “living dead!”

“Better that than looking like a bride without a groom!” replied Holly. “Seriously,” she added. “The other debutantes look absolutely fabulous in their designer gowns but with their fathers walking them about they look like they’re being auctioned off to the highest bidder! All that’s lacking is a groom and a priest. Is that how you and, uh, Hilbert met?” It was hard thinking of Montague as anything but Montague; Vernon never called him by his first name.

“Of course not,” snapped Vanessa. “You know nothing!” she added. “A Debutante Ball is a chance to be treated like a princess without the chains of wedding vows!”

“Look, here’s another Debutante,” observed Greg rather loudly effectively silencing the conversation. They all watched in silence as another young lady, elegantly dressed in white, stepped forth. Three more Debutantes made their debut before the presentation ended. Then, once everyone had seated, the waiters began to serve the food.

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Gregory A. Smythe ate his meal in silence. It wasn’t hard to do. The presence of Hilbert and Vanessa Montague had a chilling effect upon the table. They pointedly ignored both Jane and Greg. That was fine with Greg as he was fairly certain the two had somehow managed to delay the arrival of his invitation and he wanted nothing to do with them. But Greg did not feel comfortable carrying on any real conversation in front of the Montagues fearing the couple might overhear and find a way to twist innocent comments into something sinister.

Jane did not seem inclined to speak either. She kept her head down while she ate and seemed unusually interested in the food. Jane’s last words had been in defense of the weird debutante with the combat boots. That wasn’t too surprising as Jane had a soft heart and always came to the defense of the underdog even giving money to panhandlers in the sidewalk—not all, just those she seemed to think really needed it… So what conversation that did occur came from the Montagues between themselves. It was peppered with disparaging comments about the food. The food was nothing to rave about—traditional British fare, but didn’t merit such cutting interpretations. The music changed tone just as they were finishing up the dessert: Cherries Jubilee properly flambéed and served over vanilla ice cream. Greg wished it hadn’t been flambéed; he could really use a drink, failing that, anything alcoholic.

Greg forced his mind on the music: Tchaikovsky - Sleeping Beauty Waltz. How appropriate. It wasn’t a bad rendition considering the small size of the ensemble. One by one the Debutants got up with their escort to dance. It was their dance: one for everyone to watch and admire. Greg couldn’t help but think of the wedding scenario Jane had sketched. Father/daughter dance? Bride and groom dance? It made sense in a weird way. His eyes sought the debutante in the combat boots. With whom was she dancing? He spotted her easily. Her partner wasn’t the father who had walked stiffly by her side during the presentation but some young chap, rather hefty but fairly
muscular, with blond hair…

“That’s Wy—”

“Are you pregnant?” asked Jane abruptly. They all looked at Jane in surprise.

“What?” managed Vanessa in a strangled whisper.

“Pregnant!” repeated Jane. “You know with a baby? That’s what comes after a marriage doesn’t it? Or don’t you want children?”

Greg hastily stood grabbing Jane’s arm and pulled her up with him. “Let’s dance!” he suggested forcefully while pulling her away from the table. He had promised Jane she wouldn’t have to dance if she didn’t want to but her comments were really out of line and he had to get her away somehow! “What do you think you are doing?” Greg hissed as he moved her out onto the dance floor. He wrapped one arms around Jane in proper ballroom position, lifted the other arm, her hand in his, and started to dance. Jane followed his lead without hesitation or tripping. “Asking if she’s pregnant?” he scolded as he moved. “Seriously? What do you care? That was intrusive and inappropriate!” he continued angrily as he whirled her about the floor.

“I had to do something!” whispered Jane. “Before he—”

“Hi, Holly, what are you doing here?”

Greg looked up into the purple-rimmed eyes of the debutante with combat boots. But before he could process what he had seen, the girl’s partner whirled her about so his head was close to Jane. “Yeah!” he hissed angrily. “What are you doing here?”

“Last minute change in plans!” Greg heard Jane tell him. “I swear! I’d have told you had I known…” Jane stepped away from the two pulling Greg with her. He tightened his grip on Jane and whisked them towards the two who obviously knew Jane. A tap on his shoulder caused him to stop.

Greg turned and saw the Hilbert and Vanessa standing behind him. Hilbert was staring at Jane. “You!” he sputtered. “The hair and eyes! I knew they looked familiar! You’re that cr—”

“That’s right!” exclaimed Jane. “Did you think it was by accident that your little plan went wrong?” Jane stepped up even closer to Hilbert. “And if you bother me, my family or friends ever again,” Greg heard her whisper, “I’m going to dig up that video I got a few years ago and post it all over the internet frame by frame!” With that, Jane shook free of Greg’s grasp, whirled around and headed swiftly towards the exit.

Greg looked from the vanishing figure of Jane to the very white-faced Montagues, to the other couples (the strange girl and boy who knew Jane included) who had stopped dancing to watch.

“Uh, excuse me,” he said aloud and then hastened after Jane.

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Holly Wycliff raced out of the ballroom and into the hall leading to the entry. “Jane! Jane! Wait up!” called Greg behind her. Holly ignored him and kept moving. “Jane! Holly!”

Holly stopped. She whirled around to face Greg letting him catch up. “It’s Jane!” she told him fiercely. “Jane!”

“Of course, Jane,” agreed Greg aloud but his emotions screamed out: “Lie!” “Where are you going?” he questioned.

“Out!” answered Holly vaguely. She hadn’t given much thought past leaving the ballroom. It had been a way to stop the confrontation. “Away! Home!”

“That would be a very bad idea,” argued Greg. “Everybody saw you storm off,” he began, “and they’re wondering. If you don’t return, they’ll be wondering even more and they’ll turn to the Montagues for answers! I wouldn’t trust any answer they gave; would you?” He paused a moment waiting for an answer. When Holly didn’t speak, he continued, “So let’s stop the gossip short by acting as if nothing happened. After all, nothing has happened, has it? I mean, I have no idea what Hilbert was trying to say when you cut him off but it didn’t sound scandalous; nothing you said made much sense either… And I doubt if anyone but me heard that last bit you said to him…” He paused and then corrected himself. “Actually, I think that weird girl and her angry date heard but somehow I don’t think they’ll say anything…” Holly didn’t respond.
Greg straightened and gave a slight bow. “May I have this dance?” he asked softly and held out his hand. “It’s a Strauss…” he added enticingly… Almost against her will Holly focused on the strands of music that wafted into the entryway. It was a Strauss—one she recognized—every note, every twist and turn having heard it over and over on Greg’s Ipod while at Meadowsgate. “It’s made to dance to not listen…” Greg reminded Holly. “Have you ever danced to the Blue Danube?” he whispered longingly. “It’s like floating on a cloud of wonderfulness.” Greg’s emotions radiated pleasure at the mere thought.

It had always been just music to Holly, sounds she liked and enjoyed hearing, but something to actually dance to and be a part of? That was an idea Holly had never before considered, one she could not resist… Holly put her hand in Greg’s and the two went back into the ballroom.

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It was like floating on a cloud of wonderfulness! When they reached the dance floor, Holly closed her eyes and focused on the music and the emotions of those dancing around her. She let Greg lead where he wished and followed as she had practiced so often with Vernon in preparation for this event. But it was ever so much better than being with Vernon; his emotions were always filled with worry; afraid he’d trip or stumble. Greg knew how to dance and moved with confidence. This time the sensations were all pure bliss.

The waltz ended. The next tune the ensemble played was unfamiliar but Holly recognized the beat as a fox trot. Greg moved his feet to the rhythm and Holly easily followed. “Did you really fix it so their plan would go wrong?” asked Greg quietly as they danced.

“Of course not!” Holly hastened to assure Greg. “Your dad was the one smart enough to call in the RSVP and insist you come.”

“So why did you imply otherwise?”

Holly thought about that. It was a reasonable question under the circumstances. What should or could she say? “Montague and I have never met,” she finally told him. “But we know of each other. I was confirming what he thinks he knows about me…”

“What? That you’re a master planner behind the scenes?”

“Something like that…” Holly answered vaguely.

“And why did you lie about the video?”

“I didn’t li—”

“You can barely use a cell phone let alone know how to store and post some video onto the internet frame by frame.” Greg told her accusingly.

“Better he looks for it with me than elsewhere,” Holly told him in a small voice not denying his observations. “I’m pretty hard to find,” she reminded Greg. “And if he finds me, he still won’t find the video…”

“That must be an important video,” observed Greg.

“It is,” agreed Holly, “but only to the Montagues and only if it does not get publicized…”

The dance ended and a new one started but Greg led Holly back to their table. The two paused when they neared; the Montagues were already seated and waiting. The Montagues stared at Holly with malevolent eyes. “Where is it?” Vanessa demanded.

“Where you’ll never find it!” retorted Holly.

“I should think that location isn’t as important as getting it back,” interrupted Greg coolly before Vanessa could respond. “Wouldn’t you agree?” Greg slid out the chair for Holly. Holly sat; he pushed her chair in and Greg sat down as well. “The problem would be which one?” The Montagues looked at him in surprise. “Miss Smith informs me that she has more than one video in her safe keeping,” continued Greg smoothly. “Unfortunately, as she’s never actually viewed it, she doesn’t know which one you wish. Perhaps you would be good enough to describe the contents of the video for us…” he suggested. Greg leaned forward and added, “every little detail…” Greg reached into his pocket and slid out his phone. “I’ve a rather lousy memory,” he added as he held it in front of the Montagues. “So I’ll just record the description for future reference… How about
starting with the date?” The two stared at Greg in horror. Holly knew they’d say nothing. They couldn’t afford to; describing the video would be tantamount to releasing it themselves! “No?” questioned Greg noting the silence. “Then why don’t we just ignore each other,” he suggested. He left the phone on the table but within easy reach and twisted his body to face Holly. “So, what do you think of the ensemble?” he asked.

“They’re certainly versatile,” answered Holly thoughtfully as she turned to look at the ensemble. The group had started playing a rather modern rock tune.

“The bass player can really keep the beat going,” added Greg approvingly.

“Bassist,” corrected Holly gently though in truth he could also be called a “bass player.” They both knew that; she and Greg were rambling to make it clear their attention and minds were off the other two people at their table. “And you’re right,” she added, “he really is quite good.”

“My apologies,” came the silky voice of Montague. He sounded sincere, but his emotions screamed otherwise. Holly and Greg looked at him. “That outburst of mine earlier,” he explained. “It was uncalled for. You caught me by surprise, Miss … Smith,” Montague continued apologetically. “The name change, you understand. That and you look nothing like your photo. I had no idea you had decided to distance yourself from the likes of,” he glanced towards the dancing floor where Miranda and Vernon were still dancing and shuttered. “A decision I wholeheartedly approve of, by the way,” he added returning his attention to Holly. “No wonder you were so angry,” he continued. “I probably ruined all your dreams of social promotion, such that they were…” The cut had been deliberate and Greg’s emotions surged with anger at the insult; Holly quickly stomped on his foot to keep him quiet. “Purely unintentional…” Montague lamented aloud. That part was true but there was no remorse within Montague’s emotions. “But I am at a loss to understand why you felt the need to make those baseless threats!” he continued convincingly. (He wasn’t.) “I haven’t attempted to hurt you and your friends.... If you think otherwise, you are purely mistaken…” Lie!

“I meant what I said,” reiterated Holly looking steadily at Montague.

“Of course you did,” said Montague soothingly. “But you have no reason for concern. Perhaps, when I was younger,” he conceded, “but not now. We have more important things to do with our time…” Another lie. “And as for that video, it has been safe enough in your care these past years, there’s no reason to dig it up now…”

“If you are a person of your word,” Holly began carefully. “Then there is nothing to be concerned about…”

“Of course I am,” assured Montague. His voice was confident and persuasive; his emotions told otherwise. But it was not the time to challenge the truth of his words. “I propose a toast,” Montague continued with a smile and waved over one of the waiters who held a tray of drinks. “To celebrate our new relationship,” he added while selecting and removing a wine glass off the tray. “One of harmonious … understanding.” Montague removed a second glass and handed it to Vanessa. She took it silently and then returned her attention to Holly, glaring venomously.

Montague looked expectantly at Holly and Greg. “Won’t you join us?”

Holly mentally rolled her eyes; less than five seconds after he promised to leave them alone Montague was already challenging the situation. He had to know Greg had a drinking problem, and was taunting Greg. Would Greg drink or risk insulting them by refusing to join in the toast. The waiter hovered expectantly between Holly and Greg awaiting a decision.

Greg looked from Montague to the wine on the tray, to Holly and back to Montague. “Ah,” he began uncertainly.

“A toast,” agreed Holly firmly, “if the toast is a good one.”

“Of course,” Montague agreed with an easy smile and watched as Holly reached out and removed two glasses from the tray. There had been nine filled glasses on the tray neatly set up in rows of three. Montague had taken two from the first row, the row farthest from the waiter. Holly took one glass each from the second and third row, the rows nearest the waiter. Montague’s smile remained on his face but Holly sensed his disappointment as she kept hold of one glass and handed the other one, the one from the third row, to Greg. Greg took hold of the glass hesitantly.
“To secrets kept secret!” Montague announced raising his glass. Vanessa raised hers as well.
“To honour and honesty,” answered Holly raising her glass.
“To honesty,” agreed Greg raising his glass. The four clinked their glasses and took a sip.
Montague watched Holly and Greg closely as they drank. Holly took a tiny sip and set the glass on the table. She didn’t like wine. Greg took a sip. Holly felt Greg’s sensation of surprise; then he took a longer drink managing to keep the surprise out of his expression.
Montague continued to smile but Holly could sense his disappointment; then hope. “Another glass?” he suggested. What was he up to now? Trying to get Greg drunk?
“I hid it at school!” Holly whispered suddenly to Vanessa. That would distract Montague and get him off Greg’s case. Vanessa had been simmering ever since Holly and Greg had gotten to the table. She could not help but respond.
“I will find it and you at that school!” Vanessa promised venomously.
“In your dreams!” retorted Holly. “You can’t even find a thief!”
Vanessa instantly stood, white with anger!
“An excellent idea,” interjected Montague rising swiftly as well. “I’d like to dance too.” He quickly moved Vanessa away from the table and onto the dance floor before she could say anything. Of the two, Holly judged Montague as more dangerous. Vanessa was a viper ready to spit at a moment’s notice but Montague had restraint. He was careful with his words and actions, mindful of his reputation. Holly did not doubt that Montague would not hesitate to harass, embarrass or destroy the lives of any of them, but only if he thought he could do so without consequences.

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“Thief?” whispered Gregory Smythe to Jane. “What’s that about?” It was hard to think of Jane as “Holly.” Greg wasn’t sure he liked the new name.
“Just something else they would rather I not know…” Jane answered vaguely. Jane was full of surprises.
Greg lifted his wineglass to his lips and finished the contents. “How’d you manage the grape juice?” he asked curiously. Greg had been hard put to keep a straight face after taking a sip from the glass. He’d been surprised Jane had given him a glass after making that big deal about alcohol earlier and even more surprised after he took a sip…
Jane smiled. “Last row on the tray is all grape juice,” she told him. “It turns out that some people do not wish their desire for non alcoholic beverages to be made public… The waiters always refill their trays before they get to the last row. Those in the know select a glass from the last row… Everyone else gets wine…”
Someone slid into Hilbert’s seat. Greg looked into the angry green eyes of that young man who was dancing with the combat-boots girl. The combat boots girl stood next to him.
“Beat it!” the man told Greg without preamble.
“Would you like to dance?” asked the girl politely.
“Uh,” replied Greg uncertainly. This was all kind of unorthodox…
“I’ll be fine,” assured Jane.
“I guess…” Greg told the girl and stood reluctantly. It was a slow dance, nothing he ever liked dancing and certainly not with a complete stranger… Greg escorted the girl to the dance floor, put one arm around her waist and took hold of her hand. Greg held the girl close, as the dance required, but not too close; he didn’t want to risk getting stepped on by those boots. The two began to sway gently back and forth in time with the music.
“My name’s Miranda Jones,” the girl said brightly and smiled.
“Uh, Gregory Smythe,” answered Greg automatically. Were those vampire teeth??? How could she have vampire teeth? Were people really born that way?
“Who is he?” blurted Greg; it was the only thing he could think to say that wasn’t about teeth…

"Um, I don't think I'm supposed to tell," answered Miranda with a frown... "But I won't tell
you "no," if you *guess* right," she added cheerfully while smiling again; the pointy teeth showed prominently.

"Uh," Greg tried to think. Those teeth were really distracting. The guy was definitely a relative; too young to be a father or uncle... Perhaps a cousin but maybe, "Brother?" he questioned hopefully.

Miranda smiled again. Greg tried to not stare at the teeth. "They do look alike, don't they?" she said thoughtfully confirming but not actually confirming his guess.

"Uh, yeah," agreed Greg. He hadn't actually looked too closely to the brother. "But I don't think he likes me," Greg added remembering the angry face.

"No," agreed Miranda. "I gather you weren't supposed to be here tonight..." "It was a last minute thing," admitted Greg. "My dad really wanted me to come..." "Did he? My parents wanted me to come too," confessed Miranda.

"You didn't want to come?" questioned Greg in surprise. "But you, you're one of the debu—" "Debutantes? Yes," agreed Miranda. "My parents kept pestering me to go so I finally told them I would, if I could design the dress."

"You designed the dress?"

"Yes. Like it?"

"Uh..."

"It'll look better once I dye it," Miranda assured Greg confidently without waiting for an answer.

"Dye it?"

"Yes. Black. Then only the beads will show up white. If I did it right, they'll look like ribs hugging my body. Isn't that cool?"

"I suppose," said Greg dubiously. The music ended; the two stopped moving. Greg looked over at the table. The brother and Jane no longer appeared in deep conversation. "They look done," he observed aloud. "Shall we go back?"

"Sure," agreed Miranda. The two headed back. Along the way they encountered another waiter with a try of filled wine glasses.

"Want a drink?" suggested Greg.

"O.K.,” answered Miranda and she grabbed a glass. Greg reached out and grabbed a glass for himself—from the back of the tray. After a moment of hesitation, he took a second glass for Jane. She hadn’t drunk much during the toast. Greg guessed she didn’t like wine and might be thirsty. He handed one glass to Jane and proceeded to use the recently freed hand to slide out the chair to sit down.

The brother scowled at their arrival, even more when he saw what Greg had brought. "How can you even think of bringing that here after what you did!" he said angrily.

Greg froze mid-sit and blinked in surprise at the words. "Huh?"

"Give me that!" said Jane, also angry. She took Greg’s glass from his hand and shoved it under her brother’s nose. ‘Drink!’ she instructed.

“What?"

“Drink it or shut it!” she commanded forcefully. "Now!" she insisted. “That way he won’t!” Jane added glancing significantly at Greg.

The brother put the glass to his lips and took a sip. He swallowed and looked up in surprise. "Like I would ever associate with a drunk!" added Jane with disgust as Greg sat down the rest of the way.

"Ibbot!" heissed Miranda. The brother looked up. Greg looked in the same direction; Hilbert and Vanessa had returned.

“Your’re in my seat, Wycliff!” said Hilbert imperiously stopping next to the brother expectantly.

The brother, Wycliff, stood and stepped away from the chair. “She lied,” Wycliff said bluntly. “She doesn’t have it and never did; don’t bother looking for it with her.” “Too late,” said Vanessa smugly. “She already told us it’s at her school!”
“What?” exploded Wycliff. “You told them it was at that, that school?”
“It kind of slipped out,” admitted Jane. That wasn’t exactly how Greg remembered it.
“Doesn’t matter!” retorted Wycliff. “It isn’t there and never was!” he reiterated, again
addressing Hilbert.
“We shall see,” promised Vanessa determinedly.
“It’s old news now,” persisted Wycliff. “Let it stay that way…”
“As you said, it’s been safe enough in my care these past years,” reminded Jane, “and it will
remain safe as long as there’s no reason to dig it up now…”
Wycliff stepped up close to Vanessa. “I’ve seen it,” he said softly, barely within Greg’s
hearing. Wycliff leaned in closer and continued to whisper in Vanessa’s ear, his voice unintelligible.
Vanessa’s face turned white, her face remained expressionless but her eyes flashed daggers.
“We’ll continue this later,” she told the group stiffly. “Come along, dear,” she added and placed her
arm within Hilbert’s and stepped away. The two vanished into the crowd.
Wycliff’s body relaxed a bit and he faced Jane and Greg. “That’s it for now,” he announced.
“But for how long?”
“Long enough to think of something else,” replied Jane. “And soon. They’re very
determined.”
Wycliff looked again at the table and the wine glasses on it. “Do you know what’ll happen if
you drink around, uh, Jane?” he questioned sternly while looking at Greg.
“You’ll try to beat me up?” With that muscular build, Wycliff looked the type that could do
some serious damage, if Greg let him.
“Yeah,” agreed Wycliff.
“No, you wouldn’t!” argued Jane.
“Probably not,” agreed Wycliff. “She’d beat you up!”
“Right!” laughed Greg. But nobody else was laughing, well, they were, but at him not with
him. “What, What else don’t I know?”
“She’s a black belt, first stripe in Tang Soo Doo!” whispered Miranda.
“First Dan,” murmured Jane in correction.
“In what?”
“Korean Karate,” Miranda clarified. “Don’t make her mad! It’s fast music,” she added to
Wycliff. “Can we dance?”
“Uh, yeah,” Wycliff agreed looking more reluctant than not at the prospect. “See you later,” he
said to Jane.
“Bye,” added Miranda to Greg. “Nice to have met you…” And the two walked into the crowd
of dancers.
Greg looked at Jane. “Anything else I should know?” he asked dryly.
“No,” Jane answered without showing a hint of guilt. “But I’m really tired of this place,” she
told him. “Do you think we can leave?”
“Well, I suppose we’ve been here long enough,” agreed Greg. “Maybe we can catch the last
part of the concert if we hurry. Would you like that?”
“I would indeed,” smiled Jane. She slipped her arm in his and the two walked outside…

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The sleek blue and black limousine waited for them at the curb. The chauffeur straightened at their arrival and hastened to open the door. “Thank you,” murmured Jane as she slid into the back seat of the limo. Gregory Smythe got in besides her. She leaned back in the seat in obvious pleasure as the limo took off. “This is so much better,” she told Greg. “Those crowds were getting to me.” “It’ll be crowded at the concert, too,” he reminded her. “Yes, but it’s not the same,” she told him. “The people here were so jumbled. At a concert, everyone is focused on the music.” Her words didn’t make sense, but Greg didn’t push for an explanation; he had too much else to think about. Where to begin? “Where to, mum?” asked the chauffeur politely as they drove down the long lane. Greg gave the address to the concert. “Do you really have a black belt?” asked Greg. “Um, yeah,” admitted Jane. “And you never said anything?” “Course not; then you’d know and I’d lose my edge…” explained Jane. “So you’ve lost it now, your edge?” “Yeah,” she sighed, “but I still have the skills; I don’t suppose I have to worry too much around you anyway.” “That’s good to know. Were you really worried about me?” “I’m worried about everyone,” answered Jane. “I find that hard to believe,” argued Greg. “I told you I had trust issues,” replied Jane, “and I still do.” “But surely you’re over that?” protested Greg. “With you, maybe, but not everyone else,” Jane paused and took a deep breath, “I’m paranoid,” she told him. “Really paranoid. That’s why I practice my forms every day and travel around with a fake name; it makes me feel safer.” “You’re not paranoid!” protested Greg. “The restaurants! The concerts! The operas! You’ve been everywhere with me without a care in the world!” “Going to places with you makes me feel almost normal,” Jane replied. “But I’m still paranoid...” Greg shook his head in disbelief. “Then I guess I really ruined things for you by changing the plans and going to the Ball.” Jane shook her head. “Not really,” she told him. “Seeing the Montagues was a bit of a surprise,” she added. “Montague’s a vindictive snake who likes to destroy lives when he’s bored and she’s worse but they’re not what I’m afraid of.” “They’re not?” exclaimed Greg in surprise. What could be worse? “Excuse me, mum,” came the voice of the chauffeur, “but we’re being followed.” “What?” questioned Jane coming instantly alert. “Where?” she asked looking out the window behind her. Greg looked as well. All he saw were bright headlights. “Th’ limo behind th’ auto,” the chauffeur answered. “How do you know?” asked Greg curiously. “It pulled out o’ th’ parkin’ lot righ’ a’ter us,” he began. “Turned th’ same way we did an’ ‘as been behind us ever since...” “That doesn’t necessarily mean they’re following us,” replied Greg refusing to think anyone would ever want to follow them. “…and I asked th’ driver,” finished the chauffeur. “You what?” asked Greg faintly. Was that even possible? He’d never heard of such a thing... “Asked th’ driver,” repeated the chauffeur. “‘is name is Max; has a family o’ four an’ an ailing
“You found out all that just now?” asked Jane.

“Course not. I met ’im while you were at th’ ball!”

“The ball?” echoed Greg.

“Sure. We chauffeurs have got ta do sumthin’ while waitin’ fer ya all ta go home. Some of us read or work puzzles… Me, I like ta meet th’ others an get ta know who they are…”

“So Max told you he was following us?” Greg asked in disbelief.

“Sure. No one said he couldn’t…”

“‘Prob’ly because no one thought that kind of order was necessary,” filled in Greg mentally realizing suddenly it was probably pretty stupid not to have thought of it in this day of cell phones and text messages… Then again, who would have thought the chauffeurs knew each other well enough to ask such things…

“’e’s got a favor ta ask though,” continued the chauffeur.

“What?” asked Jane.

“If’n we want ta ditch ’im, could we he’p ’im make it look good first?”

“Look good?” questioned Greg in disbelief. He was still trying to wrap his mind around the idea that they were having conversations with the driver of the person following them!

“Yeah. Seems ‘is ’mployer ‘as a reputation of bein’ real stingy an’ dockin’ pay fer any ’cuse… I ’pect “loosing” us would be a pretty good ’cuse ta dock pay…”

“Who’s his employer?” questioned Jane.

“A couple called th’ Montagues… Do yeah want me ta lose ‘em?”

“I suppose,” began Jane hesitantly. “No,” she decided abruptly, “I’ve got a better idea…”

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Hilbert John Bartholomew Montague the Third leaned back in his seat. He was in their limousine watching another limousine.

Retrieving the video of Vanessa’s attempt to discredit Perkins had been the one bug in their otherwise perfect relationship. Hilbert had always intended to get it back while at Smeltings but somehow it had never happened. On the more positive side, the video had never surfaced to embarrass or blackmail Vanessa; Hilbert had hoped it would be forgotten. But then he had recognized the sister and she had brought it all up again. How was he to have known she was dating Smythe?

Vanessa was more determined than ever to get the video. She had insisted they follow the girl after the ball; Hilbert could have easily found Wycliff’s home address off the internet but Vanessa thought an assumed name meant a new residence as well… She wanted to find where the sister lived. Once the location was known, Vanessa planned to send someone in with a strong magnet to destroy any video within the house and/or nearby grounds and then make a search of the papers within to learn the name of the sister’s school. Vanessa intended to then use a magnet on it as well. “She probably attends some cheap boarding school,” she assured Hilbert. “No other place would let her stay with that appalling tattoo on her hand!” she sneered. Hilbert hadn’t seen a tattoo but Vanessa was good at noticing things like that; she was certain there was one under those lace fingerless gloves the sister wore. “How secure can it be?” Hilbert wasn’t so sure any of that was a good idea but it would do until he could think of something better.

So far, the activity had been rather boring. The limo had stopped at the very first pub in the nearest village. Smythe and the sister had gotten out. Smythe wore the chauffeur’s hat and jacket. Vanessa called it a flimsy attempt at disguise but necessary given the seedy place they had entered. She wouldn’t be caught dead in a place like that. Hilbert thought it might actually be the chauffeur, but Vanessa was certain otherwise. No girl, especially not one openly trying to improve her station, would ever choose a chauffeur over wealth and attempted nobility, at least not publicly, and certainly she wouldn’t be so crass as to dump the date for the chauffeur and make the date wait for them in the limo! Anyway, the two had gone into the pub.
Hilbert wanted to sneak in and take photos—perhaps he could get something incriminating that could be used as trade but Vanessa was certain Hilbert’d be recognized ending their chances of finding where “Jane” lived…

An hour passed; two. Hilbert shifted restlessly. It was boring in the limo; they could be doing so many other things besides “watching.” A knock sounded at his window. Hilbert looked up in surprise. He hadn’t seen anyone coming over. It must have been from behind…

Hilbert rolled down the window and looked curiously into the face of someone wearing the hat and uniform of a chauffeur—not Smythe. He was young, about Hilbert’s age, had an oval head and a friendly expression on his face. “Yes?” Hilbert asked.

“Excuse me, sir,” the man began, “Sorry ta disturb ya, sir, but I’ve sumthin for th’ missus…”

He held up a plain short envelope in his hand.

“What?” Hilbert questioned suspiciously without taking the envelope.

“Couldn’t rightly say,” answered the man; “it’s not fer me. But I wus told it wus sumthin special jes’ for th’ missus and that I wusn’t ta give it ta anyone but ‘er.”

“Who’s it from?” persisted Hilbert.

“Th’ young lady from th’ other limo,” he answered genially.

“Hand it over,” ordered Vanessa. She reached her arm out over Hilbert to get the envelope.

“What?” began Hilbert, “I don’t think that’s such a good idea…”

“Nonsense!” stated Vanessa confidently as the chauffeur gave her the envelope. “It’s just a bit of paper; what’s your worry?”

“Uh,” and Hilbert had a flash of memory where he had once opened another envelope, with near disastrous consequences… One supposedly from that same person! He reached for the envelope but Vanessa held it out of his reach on the opposite side of the vehicle. “Don—”

“Yer in real luck she’s not mad,” interrupted the chauffeur successfully distracting Hilbert.

“Huh?”

Vanessa ripped open the envelope…

“Th’ las’ person she got real mad at, well, he can’ even remember ‘is own name now…” the chauffeur said as Vanessa pulled out the card.

“Huh?” The half-smile and twinkle in the chauffeur’s eyes made it difficult to take his words seriously.

“That’s it!” questioned Vanessa disparagingly. Hilbert looked over and saw a card in her hand; thick black letters were written on it, easy to read from a distance: “Leave us alone!”

“No!” said Hilbert suddenly while reaching for the card. But it was too late! The black lettering seemed to liquefy before Hilbert’s eyes, slide off the page onto Vanessa’s fingers, down her arm and drip into her lap!

Vanessa’s shriek was deafening! Hilbert scarcely heard the, “T’aint permanent like yers was,” from the cheerful voice of the chauffeur in his other ear. “Should wear off … in a year,” the chauffeur added informatively.

“What?” questioned Hilbert. It was hard to focus on the chauffeur while Vanessa was screaming. Hilbert gingerly took the now blank card from Vanessa’s unprotesting fingers. Only, it wasn’t blank. He recognized the familiar writing of one of the invitations to the Debutante Ball. That lettering hadn’t been there before…

Vanessa lifted the fabric of her gown around the inky black spot in disbelief “What is this?” she squealed as the black puddled and ran rapidly down her gown landing on her leg and foot. “NOOOO!” she screamed.

“Course, ifin ya want it off sooner, then a daily scrub o’ some strong bitter will do th’ trick. Take only a week or so then,” the chauffeur added confidently.

Vanessa screamed some more as she tried to rub the black off and succeeded in smearing it around even more…

“This pub,” the chauffeur nodded at the pub behind him, “‘as sum real premium bitter,” he informed Hilbert in a confidential voice. “Ya should try it! Have a good ‘un!” the Chauffeur finished with a grin. He tipped his hat respectfully and walked away.
Vanessa looked at the retreating figure of the chauffeur with uncontrolled rage. “Run him down!” she ordered.

“What?” questioned their driver with surprise.

“Run … him … over!” Vanessa clarified.

“Run over who?” questioned the driver. Hilbert looked outside. There was no sign of the chauffeur who had just walked away.

“The limo!” screeched Vanessa desperately. “Drive into it!” she ordered. “Smash it!”

“What limo?” asked the driver.

Hilbert looked; the space where the limo had been parked was empty! “When did it leave?” he questioned.

“While you were talking to the chauffeur in the window,” came the answer. “I would have said something but you gave me specific instructions to never interrupt…”

“Drive!” ordered Vanessa impatiently. “They can’t have gone far!” The chauffeur obediently started the engine and moved the limo out into the road.

“No, wait!” ordered Hilbert. The driver looked at Hilbert questioningly.

“What do you mean wait!” protested Vanessa. “We’ve got to hurry! Drive!”

“No,” repeated Hilbert. “They’re long gone,” he decided aloud. “Pull over,” he instructed to the driver. “I’m paying,” he reminded the driver. The driver moved the limo to the curb and looked at Hilbert expectantly. Hilbert pulled out his wallet. “I want you to go into that pub and buy a bitter,” he instructed the driver and handed him £5. He looked at Vanessa, her face, arms and hands smudged in black. “No,” he decided aloud, “buy a whole keg!” and he handed the driver more money. “I don’t want to have to come back.” He hoped a keg would be enough.

“Are you crazy?” demanded Vanessa. “What’s that for?”

“And this,” Hilbert added pulling out an extra £50 bill while ignoring Vanessa. “Is for your silence. I don’t want you to say anything about anyone anywhere. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” The driver quickly tucked the note into his pocket.

“Have them send it to our house,” instructed Hilbert aloud. Kegs were huge and heavy. It could fit in the limo, not necessarily in the boot but certainly in the front seat passenger side, but that would require more people from the pub helping and Hilbert didn’t want anyone else to see Vanessa like this. “Tell them it’s a… a…”

“A gift, sir,” filled in the driver. “For my cousin who works there as a butler…”

“Yes, exactly,” agreed Hilbert with relief. Their butler was certainly no cousin of the driver, but the lie sounded convincing and would work. “I want it delivered tonight,” Hilbert continued. “Immediately. Bring me the change and receipt,” he finished.

“Yes, sir, right away!” The driver opened his door, slid out of the front seat of the limo and headed to the pub.

“Just what do you think you are doing with bitter?” demanded Vanessa angrily. “We should go back to the ball. Perhaps that Wycliff boy is still there!”

“With you looking like this?” questioned Hilbert.

That caused Vanessa to pause. She looked down at her blackened fingers and her ruined dress. “It’ll wash off easily enough,” she assured Hilbert.

“Of course,” agreed Hilbert though he privately didn’t believe it. “We’ve still got to get you cleaned up at first.”

“No you don’t,” argued Vanessa. “I can stay in the limo while you che—”

“Vanessa, my dear,” interrupted Hilbert. “I’ve listened to you a lot tonight. Now it’s time you listen to me…”

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Chapter 4

The days that followed the Princess’ mum’s death were sad indeed. Consumed by grief, the Princess barely spoke; she lost interest in food and the world around her. Whenever possible, the Princess slipped into her mum’s room to help her remember happier times.

One day a letter arrived at the castle. It was an invitation to a very special school. Only princes and princesses could attend this school and then only by invitation… After much consideration, the Princess’ grandmum reluctantly decided to send the Princess to the special school. Though her grandmum knew she’d be lonely without the Princess, she hoped seeing new places and making new friends would shake the Princess out of her depression and help her better cope with the loss of her mum.

When the Princess learned she was to go to the special school, she felt very scared. It would mean leaving the only home she ever knew to live with a bunch of strangers. But the Princess was a dutiful granddaughter and when the time came to leave, she kept her fears to herself and went with her grandmum to the station and the train that would take her to the special school...

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The Hogwarts Express looked different somehow. Holly Wycliff couldn’t figure out why. Was it the colour? Size? Shape? Something else? Not that it mattered. It wasn’t as if Holly had taken the Express enough times to recognize any differences if she saw them. Sure, Holly had ridden the return train to Kings Cross Station often, but she’d only ridden on the train to Hogsmeade twice before and the second time she had scarcely looked at the outside while she ran to get on before it left. No one else seemed bothered so more likely, the differences Holly thought she saw were purely fictional, manifestations of her own fears, imaginary excuses to not get on.

“Are you all right?” questioned Cousin Harry quietly in her ear. Cousin Harry always seemed to know when Holly was worried or apprehensive.

A summer of muted Muggle emotions had been extremely relaxing but had left Holly mentally unprepared for the stronger emotions of the wizard world. Even friendly emotions seemed ten times stronger and harder to block or ignore. The first witch Holly spotted practicing Occlumency brought back all Holly’s fears with a rush. Suddenly she was certain there was an invisible witch or wizard practicing Occlumency waiting to capture her behind every corner in Diagon Alley! The certainty left her near paralyzed with fear!

Cousin Harry had noted Holly’s distress and immediately whisked her to St. Mungo’s leaving Ginny and his family to shop for school supplies.

Healer Winonan assured Holly the feelings were temporary and would pass with time. Holly wasn’t so certain. “Still,” continued Winonan speculatively, “it might be a good idea to keep someone nearby just in case…”

“No!” exclaimed Holly emphatically. “It’s not like before! I’m not having flashbacks,” Holly insisted; “I was just afraid! It was only for a while; it won’t happen again,” she assured him.

Winonan stared at Holly without comment but Holly could feel all the things he wasn’t saying... They both knew Holly couldn’t promise it wouldn’t happen again or that her fears wouldn’t morph into larger than life proportions… Such things had happened before.

“I can’t do that to my friends again,” Holly added miserably. They had had to accompany Holly everywhere during her third year. “They never said anything, but I know I was a bother to all of them and I felt so guilty all the time…” Holly explained further. “I just want to be treated
“Your health and safety always come first,” stated Winonan sternly. “Your friends would want that over a bit of inconvenience any day!”

“I believe I could arrange for a house elf to keep an eye on Holly while at Hogwarts,” began Cousin Harry. “Discretely,” he added. “The burden would no longer be on the other students and they need never know it’s happening… Would that be acceptable?”

“I suppose,” agreed Winonan speculatively. “But you still need to keep up your medical journal and meet with Madam Pompey as soon as you arrive at Hogwarts and regularly thereafter…”

“Agreed,” said Holly promptly. She wasn’t sure how the house elf part would work but she’d worry about that later...

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“Cousin Harry?” began Holly while they were going up the stairs. They had just finished visiting Mr. Henderson. Not visiting, actually, but viewing. There was a two-way mirror that opened into Mr. Henderson’s room. Holly and Cousin Harry had watched Mr. Henderson as he sat contentedly on the floor stacking blocks and then knocking them over again. Holly needed to reassure herself that Mr. Henderson was indeed present at St. Mungo’s and that the emotions she sensed from Mr. Henderson matched his behavior. They did, but a part of Holly would always be afraid Mr. Henderson would rise again as Sir to terrorize her.

“About that house elf…” Holly continued, “I think knowing all the elves at Hogwarts were watching me all the time would make me feel even more paranoid…”

“Do you still have Winky?” asked Cousin Harry.

“Winky? Of course!” To save Holly from Sir, the family had taken on a house elf named Winky.

“Could you call her please?”

Holly nodded, “Winky!” she called out.

Immediately a small house elf with a bulbous tomato red nose wearing a snowy white pillowcase appeared. “Yes, miss?” she said in her squeaky high voice and looked expectantly at Holly.

Cousin Harry knelt down so he was the same height as Winky. “Could you do a favor for me?” he began. Winky looked questioningly at Cousin Harry. “Healer Winonan wants a house elf to keep an eye on Miss Wycliff while she’s at Hogwarts. Could you do that?” Winky looked at Holly questioningly and then back at Cousin Harry. “It’s not busy work,” Cousin Harry assured Winky. “It’s for medical reasons. Holly sometimes feels very distressed,” Winky’s ears flopped.

“Scared,” filled in Holly bluntly knowing Winky hadn’t understood Cousin Harry’s words. “Yes, scared,” agreed Cousin Harry. “You might not see a reason for her to be scared, but she could still be very scared. We know you’re not a Healer,” added Cousin Harry, “but if Holly looks scared and doesn’t seem to be able to manage, then help her out, or, if you can’t help her then take her to someone who can or bring her some help. Can you do that?” Winky nodded her head solemnly, her huge bat-like ears waved gently up and down but then she swung her head again in Holly’s direction.

“Yes,” Holly acknowledged. “It’s an order.” Winky smiled and straightened proudly to her full height. “But invisible!” added Holly suddenly. “I don’t want people to see you following me about!” Winky immediately vanished.

“Is she still here?” questioned Cousin Harry curiously.

“Yes!” assured Holly.

“Can you sense her emotions?”

“Yes!” smiled Holly. Winky was thrilled with the responsibility; her unbridled joy radiated out loudly. Winky would be at Hogwarts with Holly anyway; her father wanted nothing to do with Winky. This gave Winky purpose for her presence.
“I can arrange a portkey for you, if you wish,” Cousin Harry offered bringing Holly’s mind back to the present and the Hogwarts Express train filled with witches and wizards in front of her. Holly shuttered mentally at the suggestion. Sir had faked her death using a portkey explosion. Holly hadn’t been there to remember any of that, but she had no interest in taking a portkey ever again… “No,” Holly said determinedly. “I can do this.”

“Of course you can,” agreed Cousin Harry.

“Holly! You’re here!” greeted Holly’s best friend Becky Smith pushing through the crowd of students and parents and excitedly giving Holly a welcoming hug.

“We were worried when we didn’t see you in Diagon Alley,” added their friend Mark Owens who had come up with Becky. Becky’s family was Muggle so she would come early and stay with the Owens to do school shopping and go to the station.

“Albus said you had to go to St. Mungo’s,” finished Becky. “Are you OK?” she asked with concern.

“Course I’m O.K.,” assured Holly. “I just had to have a last minute check-up before Hogwarts. That’s all.”

“If you’re certain…”

“I’m certain.”

“Need help with the bags?” asked Mark.

“No thanks,” answered Holly. “I’ve got it all here!” she added in explanation while patting the extendable bag she had gotten from the Hufflepuffs last year.

“If you’ve got an extendable bag, use it!” James Potter had advised Holly when he saw the bag the previous night. So Holly had spent her evening stuffing her bag with everything school related.


“My pleasure,” he told Holly. “And if you sense something odd or unusual,” Cousin Harry added softly. “Don’t keep it to yourself! Tell someone right away!”

“Yes, sir.” The hand of Pettigrew had somehow found it’s way into Hogwarts the previous year and had caused all sorts of behaviour changes within the Slytherins. Holly had sensed something was off with their emotions but had said nothing thinking it was all her imagination. Holly resolved to take her senses more seriously so that would never happen again.

“Good luck in Romania,” Holly added to James, who stood next to his father.

“Thanks, Cuz,” said James straightening proudly at her words. James, Cousin Harry’s eldest son, was no longer attending Hogwarts. He would be leaving for Romania to begin an internship studying dragons with his Uncle Charles. He was terribly excited at the prospect. “Have fun at school,” he added cheerfully. Holly nodded.

Holly said final “Farewells” to Mrs. Potter and the Weasleys, who stood with the Potters, before following Mark and Becky onto the train.

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Though she said nothing, the princess was very afraid. What would the other princes and princesses be like? Were they nice? Would they like her? The Princess took her bag onto the train and sat down on the first empty seat she found. She placed her bag upon her lap and scooted herself up against the wall to make room for other princes and princesses to sit down next to her, if they wished. But would they? What would they say? What would she say back? The Princess pushed herself into the side of the train making herself as small as possible and hid her head and shoulders behind the bag on her lap. Perhaps they wouldn’t notice her…

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“Holly?” asked Conner poking his head into their compartment. Several other concerned heads appeared behind Conner’s.

“Yes?” Holly Wycliff was lounging on a seat with her Hufflepuff friends. They had already updated each other on summer news, stuffed themselves on food from the snack cart and were basically relaxing until the trip ended. Winky had found space with the luggage above and was broadcasting utter bliss at being on “assignment.” Holly’s cat Sasha was lying on the seat between Holly and Becky. She had twisted her body out so Holly could rub her stomach and was purring happily. Sasha was invisible, or near invisible with a disillusionment charm. Anyone looking on might have thought it strange to see Holly’s hand rub a patch of “nothing” but the Hufflepuffs were used to Sasha’s invisible state and thought nothing of it. The Slytherins had kidnapped Sasha last year so the disillusionment charm was a way to keep Sasha safe…

“We’d like you to take a read on Richards,” Conner announced bluntly.

“Why?”

“Richards is claiming he’s the *Personal* Assistant to McGonagall and trying to boss the rest of us around like he’s king!”

“I’ve never heard of such a position,” added Albus. “Have you?”

“He insisted all the prefects meet with him for their orientation,” continued Lily poking her head through the doorway.

“And was terribly rude when we told him Taylor was off finding food…” added Rose Weasley.

“We don’t think he’s really a Personal Assistant to McGonagall!” continued Hugo, Rose’s little brother. “I mean, he’s *Slytherin!* Why would she ever entrust a *Slytherin* with any kind of power—especially after last year?

Holly thought about it. She’d never heard of a Personal Assistant to the Headmistress before; it seemed totally unnecessary. And Slytherins were on the bottom of her list for trustworthy people, but did she really want to leave her nice cocoon of friendly emotions to check it out? Not really. “Leave it for now,” she told the group. “He’s probably telling the truth.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Richards is proud,” began Holly. “If he were lying, McGonagall would correct him once we got to Hogwarts and she’d do it in front of *everybody*! That would be very embarrassing! Richards does *not* like to be embarrassed. He would never deliberately say or do something he knew would get him embarrassed. If Richards keeps up his obnoxious ways,” Holly continued thoughtfully, “I’m sure we can think of other ways to curb his behavior…” That’s what they had done last year with the Slytherin bullying. It had worked then and Holly was confident they could do it again if necessary.

“O.K.” said Conner reluctantly. “See you later.” The door to their compartment slid shut. Holly leaned back and closed her eyes determined to enjoy every last minute of peace and bliss before the train stopped and she would again have to face the rest of the wizard world.

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The Express slowed. A voice echoed through the train: “We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes’ time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately.”

Holly Wycliff stood and gathered her things as the Express slowed to a stop at Hogsmeade. All the First year students left their luggage on the train, of course; they had a boat to catch, but the other students didn’t. It seemed rather foolish to Holly as hauling their luggage about was bulky and time consuming, but Mark explained that once the luggage hadn’t arrived from the train. It wasn’t found on the train either! What happened was still a mystery but the resulting confusion set class instruction back a week and nearly cost McGonagall her recently appointed position as Headmistress. McGonagall had since assured the students that new security features were in place so that would never happen again, but none of the students wanted to risk it. Instead, they dropped their luggage off under the entryway stairs and the house elves would transport the items to their
respective dorms from there. Holly had asked once how the elves knew where each item went but Mark had no answer for that.

“Firs’ Years!” Holly Wycliff heard Professor Hagrid shout outside her train window while she helped Becky balance everything into a manageable load to take off. “This way!” Hagrid added in that familiar loud voice. Holly saw the frightened Firsts through the corner of her eye trail along behind the huge form of Professor Hagrid as she left the train. Though she hadn’t done it herself, Holly knew he would be taking them to the docks. They would approach Hogwarts by the lake and enter separately from everyone else. They still needed to be “sorted.”

“Make way! Make way!” came an imperious voice. Holly looked towards the voice and saw Anthony Richards, resplendent in purple robes, pushing his way through the crowds and heading the same direction as the Firsts. “I’m coming along!” he announced importantly to anyone listening. Holly heard no objection from Hagrid so she guessed Richards was intended to join them… She wondered why McGonagall would make him an assistant… She joined her friends and stood in line for a carriage.

“Can anyone else see them?” called out Albus loudly. Holly looked up at his voice.

“Anyone?” asked Albus again with a desperate edge to his voice.

Albus was clearly upset but she didn’t know why. “Um, why don’t you go on without me while I see what is going on…” she murmured to her friends. Becky and Mark nodded. “Save a seat for me at the table,” Holly told them. Then she made her way over to Albus.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“They’re not there!” Albus told Holly. “You believe me, don’t you? They’re not there!”

“But they have to be there!” argued Rose. “Lookit they’re moving just like normal!” she insisted while nodding towards the coaches. Holly looked at the coaches too. Students got into the coaches with their luggage; when the door closed, the coach moved off towards Hogwarts. They looked as they had the last time Holly had seen them.

“Just because you can’t see them doesn’t mean they’re not there,” Rose continued persuasively.

“It just means you never could see them in the first place,” came the snarky voice of Scorpius Malfoy.

“Only now, you’ve decided to “not” see them anymore and are making just as big a production as you did when you claimed to see them!” added Alanna Warrington. She and Malfoy laughed as they cut in front of the Potters to take the waiting coach just beyond. It rolled off once the door shut.

“They’re not there!” insisted Albus stubbornly. “You believe me don’t you?” he asked Holly again.

“Yes, I believe you,” agreed Holly. Albus oozed honesty. Holly knew the coaches were actually pulled by invisible creatures called Thestrals. But only those who had “seen” death could see Thestrals. Albus had “seen” death, the results of a horrible time-reverse curse, but none of the other students had.

“Father’s alive,” reminded Lily with a quivering voice. “Perhaps the magic that enabled you to see them has worn off,” she reasoned.

“They must be there!” echoed Hugo. “They can’t be moving on their own!”

Albus shook his head. “I don’t think the magic works that way,” he insisted. “Something’s wrong! They’re not there, I tell you!”

“You can’t see them,” agreed Holly. “But that doesn’t mean they’re not there…” she added thoughtfully. In response, Albus jumped off the platform into the path of a rolling coach. Rose screamed. The coach continued to move slowly forward despite Albus’ presence; Albus easily dodged the wheels as he ran around the coach.

“See!” he insisted. “There’s nothing in front!” He ran around the coach a second time, this time stopping in front of where the Thestral should be and slashed the air with his wand several times to emphasize his point before again stepping to the side of the rolling coach.

“O.K.” agreed Rose reluctantly. “They’re not there. So what? It’s not like the school can’t
use some other way to make the coaches roll. We can ask Hagrid when we get to Hogwarts. Perhaps the Thestrals are sick or contagious or something.” Rose looked longingly at the coach and then to Albus. “If we don’t take the coach we’re going to get stuck walking!” she whined. “I hate walking! Last time it took Holly and James forever to walk from the station to Hogwarts!” she reminded looking at Holly for confirmation. “I don’t want to miss the sorting and dinner!”

“And if we’re late we’ll lose House points!” Hugo complained.

“Get on!” urged Rose while moving her things into the coach. “It’s the last one! We can get everything sorted once we get there.”

Albus looked at Holly. “Do you sense anything?”


Albus looked at Conner.

“Whatever you decide,” replied Conner to the unspoken question. “But if there’s trouble, it’s plainly not here…” He looked about the nearly empty station platform as he spoke. All the while Rose and Hugo were moving bags onto the coach.

“I’m staying with you,” stated Lily loyally.

“Come on!” urged Rose again when they had finished loading up the coach.

“I don’t like this,” said Albus worriedly as he drew his wand. “But we should stick together. Come on,” he told the others. Conner, Lily and Holly drew their wands and got into the coach. Albus followed closing the door behind him.

Holly sensed Winky’s emotions move overhead; she was obviously getting onto the top of the coach. Sasha, still invisible, leaped lightly onto Holly and curled up on her lap. Once settled, Holly double-checked to make sure her second wand (Lily’s wand, a gift from Headmaster Snape,) was in place at her waist and her first wand (the one Sir had stolen and was later replaced by the rainbow eucalyptus wand she now held) was securely strapped to her leg. You could never be too ready.

“You’re making too much of this,” scolded Rose as the coach began to move. “There’s probably a simple explanation,” she added, “one that will make us feel so stupid for not having thought of it sooner,” but she drew her wand out as she spoke.

Hugo sighed. “Better safe than sorry,” he added and pulled out his wand. They all sat in silence, wands extended, as the coach continued on its way to Hogwarts.

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Anthony Richards closed the door to the annex behind all the new First year students. He stood proudly in back while Longbottom began his orientation speech. Anthony could tell the professors were not pleased with his elevated position as Headmistress’ Assistant. Longbottom didn’t give Anthony the time of day, not even a second glance before launching into his speech. That oaf Hagrid had ignored him, too—not one word acknowledging Anthony or his position all the way over on the boats! But it didn’t matter. Walking in with the Firsts and participating in the Sorting Ceremony would give Anthony all the authority he needed validating his claims to being the Official Assistant to the Headmistress in front of both students and professors.

The Firsts looked positively pathetic: uncertain, worried, nervous, scared of their own shadows. Had he ever looked like that? Anthony doubted it. He always knew he was a Slytherin, never considered the Hat would say otherwise, so the Ceremony was a mere formality.

Longbottom finally finished his speech. He pointed his wand at the door and it glided open. “Step aside for Professor Longbottom!” instructed Anthony. The students swiftly parted like a wave. Longbottom swept through the path the students created without touching anyone.

“Follow us,” Anthony ordered stepping in behind Longbottom, close, but not too close. He checked to make sure his robes were straight and his hair in place. This would be his grand entrance as the Headmistress’ Assistant. It had to look perfect.

They moved past a huge pile of luggage that spilled out from under the stairs in the entryway. “The house elves are exceedingly lazy,” mused Anthony to himself as they walked. “Must do something about that!” And Anthony began to think of all the other changes he would make now that he was in charge…

The doors to the Great Hall opened and Anthony proudly marched in followed by all the Firsts. There were 39 in all, two less than last year. Anthony had the complete list in front of him. He would read aloud each name, wait for the Sorting Hat to do its thing and record the decision of the Hat.

“Wait here,” instructed Anthony while he walked up with Longbottom to the hat placed on the stool. He looked up at the head table as he walked; the Headmistress and the other staff and professors all sat together watching. Longbottom stopped next to the stool. Anthony proudly stood next to him. The room grew quiet. The battered scorched Hat quivered sending a cloud of dust into the air and it began to speak.

*Once upon a time there were friends four
Slytherin, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Gryffindor.
They shared a dream to create a door,
Beyond which housed on any shore.
The best of education forever more.*

*But once created, they parted ways…*

“Blah, blah, blah!” Anthony never bothered listening to the dumb poem spoken by the ratty old hat! It was same/ol’, same/ol’! The four founders built Hogwarts and then split up. They set up four houses that reflected their values and divided the students accordingly. The stupid but brave went into Gryffindor, the smart but lazy went into Ravenclaw, the worthwhile, cunning and ambitious came to Slytherin, and the Hufflepuffs took everyone else. Big deal! Anthony remembered reading once that the Dark Lord had suggested doing away with the Sorting Hat altogether. It sounded much more efficient. Anthony had said as much to Paige Crowley, then his brother’s girlfriend; she had disagreed not wanting to deal with all that riffraff in *their* dorm… She had a point.

Anthony had heard the Hat did nothing but sit on the shelf all year; that explained the dust, but
he wondered how it had come to look so ratty. Probably the four had enchanted an old hat no one
wanted to begin with and now they were stuck with it…

As the Hat spoke, Anthony gradually became aware of a change in the atmosphere, a murmur
of discontent of sorts. He looked around finally identifying the source as coming mostly from the
Ravenclaws. That was odd. They were usually very attentive during the speech. He’d have to talk
with them about that. Showing disrespect at a time like this!

Finally the Hat stopped speaking. Now it was his turn! Anthony straightened, unrolled his
official roster of new students and opened his mouth to speak.

“Ashcroft, Blaize!” came Longbottom’s booming voice. Anthony closed his mouth in
annoyance. That was supposed to be his job! Not only that, Longbottom’d said the wrong name!
The First years looked at each other with obvious confusion on their faces.

A young feminine voice spoke out from the Ravenclaw table. “But I’ve already been sorted!”

Anthony looked again at Longbottom. “Senility!” he thought suddenly. “That’s why
McGonagall agreed so readily to my offer to assist! She wants me to cover for the professors! That
could work into a real sweet position done properly,” thought Anthony with excitement. “Though
much more difficult out in the open like this… Uh, Professor,” began Anthony in a whisper. “I
believe you have the wrong list…”

Longbottom moved over to the stool, lifted the hat and looked expectantly at the Firsts plainly
ignoring Anthony. “Sir?” Anthony moved up close, tapped Longbottom’s shoulder to get his
attention and the lights went out! Well, not totally out—the thousands of candles lit midair that had
been floating overhead vanished leaving behind the huge flaming torches attached to the wall that
was the usual illumination for the Great Hall. It took a while for his eyes to adjust. In front was the
crowd of frightened Firsts. And next to him—Longbottom was not there! “Huh?” Anthony looked
around in surprise. There was no Longbottom anywhere. Nor was there any Sorting Hat!

“Wh-what’s going on?” questioned someone in the room.
“Homonum Revelio” shouted some of the students and they pointed their
wand about the platform.
“No one’s here!” confirmed the students on the stage.
“Where are they?” asked another student.

In the silence that followed, Anthony was uncomfortably aware that everyone was staring at
him expectantly. “What?” he questioned loudly. “I didn’t do it!” he denied instantly. The words slid
easily off his tongue; he’d had lots of practice making denials the previous year, but this time it was
actually true!

“Who else?” asserted Marella Avery (Slytherin, 7th year or S7.) “You’ve been with
Longbottom the whole time and Hagrid before that!”

“But I can’t Apparate and neither of us were holding wands!” reminded Anthony defensively.

“Nor were the other professors,” spoke prefect Donald Wrezenski (Hufflepuff, 5th year or
H5.)

“They didn’t need to. We’re all suitably impressed,” stated prefect Olivia O’Shea (S7) in a
bored voice. She stepped forth confidently. O’Shea was tall, almost 2 meters with wavy shoulder-
length auburn hair. She wore knee high black boots, a short pleated green and gold plaid skirt,
matching vest, tie, jacket and beret. Anthony noticed immediately O’Shea had shed her black school
robes despite his specific instructions in the prefect meeting on the train that they remain on until after
dinner! Total disrespect! He’d have to do something about that… “You can tell us how you did it
later,” continued O’Shea, “but I’d like to get this over with; call the professors in now,” she ordered
with a toss head.

“What do you mean?” asked Anthony.

“I mean the whole thing has been a trick from the start using images. Had no idea it was being photographed,” continued O’Shea, “but am not surprised—recording important events for posterity, you know…”

“Images?” questioned Anthony.

“Images,” she replied firmly. “Last year’s poem, last year’s list; Longbottom and the Hat were never here…”

“The Headmistress?” asked Anthony in disbelief. The last year stuff made sense in a weird way but if that was what had happened, it was none of his doing…

“Headmistress McGonagall wears the same dress robes every year,” spoke out a voice from the Ravenclaw table. Anthony identified it as coming from Leila Pilkington (R6), “but Professor Lovegood never has, until now…”

“Doesn’t matter why you did it, but your fun’s over. Come out, come out, wherever you are!” O’Shea called expectantly. Nothing happened. “Call them in!” O’Shea ordered again looking at Anthony.

“I didn’t do this!” repeated Anthony.

“Of course you did!” accused Alanna Warrington (S7) stepping forward. “You and McGonagall cooked this up to somehow improve your status at the school…”

“If you think McGonagall would ever disrupt the Sorting Ceremony just to do anything to enhance some self aggrandized paper pusher with a fancy title then you’re dumber than I thought,” came the lazy drawl of Conner Fitzpatrick (Gryffindor, 6th year or G6.) He walked down the center of the hall, wand extended, and faced Warrington. Fitzpatrick had been full of himself ever since he pulled out that Sword of Gryffindor last year…

“So what do you think happened?” Warrington demanded of Fitzpatrick.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, “but I do know that whatever is going on is not good.”

“What makes you say that?” she demanded imperiously. “The missing thestrals?” she stated disparagingly while looking around the familiar Hall filled with students no doubt checking for nods of approval.

“Partly,” agreed Fitzpatrick without a hint of shame. “We checked,” Fitzpatrick added. “Albus was right! There was nothing pulling the coaches. But it’s more than that. The professors are missing, the thestrals are missing, candles, dishes and place settings are missing, and, I would guess, the house elves are missing too! Or didn’t you notice that huge pile of luggage outside that hasn’t yet been put away… Now, the first thing we should do is let the Ministry know…”

“Wait a minute,” protested Anthony. “You’re not in charge!”

“Like you are?”

“Yes!” insisted Anthony proudly.

“At most, you’re “McGonagall’s Assistant” and at the moment, there is no McGonagall to assist!” Fitzpatrick stated firmly.

“And as her Assistant,” persisted Anthony, “I’m in charge in her absence!” Anthony had spent all summer dreaming about his position and what it would mean. He got to hold the Prefect meeting so he was definitely higher than them.

“Yeah? And just what would you tell us to do?” challenged Fitzpatrick. He didn’t even bother trying to hide the open contempt in his expression.

“Uh.” What would he do? Anthony looked around the Hall stalling for time to think. The rest of the students stood with wands out, mostly pointed in his direction. Anthony was uncomfortably reminded of the last time he had seen the entire student body with their wands out facing him. It had been at the Memorial Ceremony. He and the other Slytherins were about to—well he really wasn’t sure what they were planning to do now, but it had been important at the time… Anyway, the rest of the students had turned and disarmed them before Anthony had even realized they had gotten their wands out!

“You have also managed to unite the whole student body against you!” Malfoy Senior’s
scathing words echoed in Anthony’s head as he looked about. The words hadn’t meant much to Anthony at the time either but their meaning became shockingly clear now! There was no way Anthony could force these students to do anything for him either alone or on the strength of McGonagall’s name.

But Anthony dearly wanted the respect and deference that came with the title! He wanted people to look to him as they had to his brother Tom when he had been Prefect! Anthony wanted their admiration, support and cooperation. Wanted them to follow his lead! But in looking about, Anthony realized a single wrong word would dash all those dreams in an instant. What could he say? His eyes fell upon a movement within the crowd. He recognized Albus Potter (G6) moving towards some luggage stacked within the Hall, a rolled parchment in his hand. Potter clearly had so little respect for Anthony that he hadn’t even bothered to watch Anthony’s confrontation with Fitzpatrick. Potter reached up to an owl cage that rested on the top of the bags... It gave Anthony an idea…

“I would suggest notifying the Hogwarts Governors, first,” said Anthony loudly answering Fitzpatrick’s question. “Preferably Governor Malfoy, as he has seniority, but I suppose any Governor would do,” he added in a dismissive voice. “Potter!” he called out. Potter stopped, and looked at Anthony almost guiltily. “Is your father still a governor?”

“Uh, ’course,” answered Potter, clearly uncomfortable with the attention.

“Why don’t you send an owl to your father,” Anthony commanded. “I’m sure he is capable of notifying the proper authorities…”

Potter hesitated, obviously uncertain how to respond. No doubt his first response was to refuse anything Anthony said in general principals, but he couldn’t, not this time; it was plain he had already written his father and intended to send the letter no matter what. Wordlessly Potter turned his attention to the cage. He removed his owl and securely tied the note around the owl’s leg. Then Potter kind of lifted the owl up into the air and let go. The owl stretched out his wings and began to fly heading out the nearest window…

“Thank you,” said Anthony calmly making it appear as if Potter was following Anthony’s “order!”

“That was a no-brainer,” came Fitzpatrick’s sarcastic voice. “Albus was going to do that anyway. What now?” he questioned.

“Now, uh,” Anthony looked around the room for another idea, something he could suggest that he was fairly certain the others would agree to… His eyes fell on the group of Firsts standing in front of him. They looked more pathetic than ever. They had looked frightened before, and now looked even worse with wide eyes, pale faces and trembling lips.

“I say we continue what we had begun,” Anthony answered carefully.

“Huh?”

“We finish the Sorting…”

“There’s no Sorting Hat!” stated Rose Weasley (G6) bluntly.

“No,” agreed Anthony while again looking around the Hall. It took a while to find whom he wanted; but he knew she had to be there. Finally, he spotted the slim blonde Hufflepuff with a single beaded braid backed up against the wall behind the Hufflepuff table with wand extended. “But there’s Wycliff!”

“Me!” Wycliff squeaked in surprise.

“You!” affirmed Antony. “You’re an Empath,” he reminded the group aloud. “Surely you can tell the differences between House emotions by now.” Whether or not she could had been a topic of much discussion in the Slytherin Common room; most agreed she surely could.

“This is ridiculous!” spoke out Prefect Taylor O’Daniels (G6.) “We have more important things to worry about than Sorting!”

“I disagree,” stated Anthony firmly. “Hogwarts is based on the Sortings,” he began in explanation. “We eat and sleep together by house. These students don’t even have a place to sit down until they’ve been sorted!” Anthony gestured at the tables within the Hall. “Would you have them all stand in the middle of the Hall while we discuss other matters?” He looked again around the Hall as he spoke. He had them now. No one could expect that. “Now I say they should be properly
sorted or we assign them all to Hufflepuff here and now so they can at least sit down!”

“No!” sputtered Nicholas Adderson (S5) disparagingly.

“Yes, Hufflepuff!” retorted Anthony. “The Hufflepuffs take anyone!” and substituted aloud the more positive explanation of, “The Hufflepuffs welcome all.” The Slytherin mutterings fell silent. Anthony could guess why; if all the Firsts were taken by Hufflepuff, then the Hufflepuffs would hold the majority should anything ever come to a vote…

“Well?” Anthony asked looking directly at Wycliff as he spoke. If Wycliff agreed, the Hufflepuffs would agree too. As cousins, the Potters would back Wycliff and get the Gryffindors to agree. The Slytherns wouldn’t strenuously object to the sorting because they all wanted to see if she could do it and the Ravenclaws, well, they were probably curious too… Wycliff didn’t move; didn’t speak.

Anthony passed the other students and walked up close to Wycliff until they were eye to eye. Her pale hair hung straight on either side; a butterfly clip on one side kept it out of her face; the bead that held her single braid on the other side showed up dark against the rest of her hair.

“Look at them,” Anthony whispered softly directing Wycliff’s attention to the huddled group of First still standing in the midst of the older students, most with wands out warily. “They’re alone, and terrified. They don’t even have a house to claim as their own. I know the Hufflepuffs would take them all in,” Anthony continued, “but you can help them more; only you can give them a place to belong…”  They were words calculated to convince Wycliff, a Hufflepuff, to help—Anthony hoped.

When not tutoring Anthony for the O.W.L.S. retest, Paige had given him lessons on how to approach vendors from different Houses to cut the best deal. She had drilled him on the differences between the houses and how to use that knowledge when dealing with different witches and wizards. Paige taught Anthony to use reasons that appealed to the specific Houses and the Hufflepuffs had a soft heart for the weak and defenseless.

Wycliff stared back at Anthony without speaking. “Please,” Anthony whispered willing all the sincerity he could as he spoke. The word meant nothing to Anthony but Paige said members from the other Houses had a weakness for the term and he really wanted Wycliff to Sort.

Then Anthony waited giving Wycliff time to think. After what seemed an eternity, but could only have been a minute or two, Wycliff nodded her head. It was just a fraction of movement, but definitely a nod.

“Yes!” Anthony hid his jubilation behind a calm dignified expression. If this worked, a successful sorting would leave the Firsts indebted to him for making it happen and strengthen Anthony’s position as leader. Anthony stepped back to one side giving Wycliff space to move. Wycliff pocketed the wand in her hand. Then she took a step forward. Anthony moved next to her. The two walked side-by-side into the center of the Hall and stood next to the stool.

“Everyone be seated,” commanded Richards importantly. Slowly the students pocketed their wands, moved to their tables and began to sit. Holly Wycliff remained standing uncertainly next to Richards. It felt weird standing alongside Richards, like she actually liked him or something, which she didn’t, and she certainly did not like her Empathic abilities spotlighted, but Richards was right. The Firsts had to be sorted; their emotional distress screamed out louder than the other emotions within the Hall. Richards was unusually cheerful despite the circumstances. Holly wasn’t sure why, but as near as she could tell, there wasn’t any malice behind it. She was also fairly certain Richards had nothing to do with their present circumstances; he had been just as surprised as the rest when Professor Longbottom vanished.

When the other students got seated and quiet, Richards turned to Holly. “Ready?” he asked.

“I suppose.” Holly looked about the Hall apprehensively; she didn’t like being the center of attention.
Richards smiled. He straightened proudly. “The Sorting Ceremony shall now begin,” he announced and unrolled the parchment he had been clutching in his hand.

“Averdall, Mason.”

The Firsts all looked at each other and then a short pudgy boy with sandy coloured hair and lots of freckles pushed forward. "That’s me," he told Holly and Richards. “What do I do?” He used the sleeve of his robe to hastily wipe off his tear-stained face and looked at them expectantly.

Richards looked at Holly. She gulped nervously knowing all eyes were on her now. “Um, sit on the stool,” she told Averdall. The boy did as he was told.

Averdall was a Gryffindor. That was easy enough to tell, but Holly hesitated to say it aloud. It was too fast—too easy. If she spoke so soon, would anyone take her pronouncement seriously? What if she were wrong? Sorting affected everything in the wizard community. She needed to be sure.

Holly stepped in front of Averdall and knelt down so she was eye level. “Give me your hands,” she told him. Averdall quickly wiped his hands off on his robe and held them out. They were chubby fat hands smudged with—whatever. Holly ignored their appearance and took his hands in hers. Almost immediately, the emotions of everyone else became muted in comparison. “What do you like to do?” Holly questioned softly.


“Pirates!” he said promptly.

“Tell me about them,” she encouraged.

“They’re brave and strong and…”

Holly closed her eyes as Averdall rambled on and let the enthusiasm behind his words wash over her.

A loud screech sounded! Averdall stopped speaking; new worry filled his emotions. Holly opened her eyes and looked at the source of the screech. Albus’ owl had returned and had landed in front of him. But it was too soon! There was no way it could have gone to London and back in such a short time! Holly gulped; a tight knot formed in the pit of her stomach. There was only one reason Holly could think of to explain the swift return—that he couldn’t deliver the message!

“Keep sorting!” instructed Richards in a low voice. Worry now replaced his earlier jubilance. “We’ll deal with it after.”

Holly nodded. “Who do you admire the most?” she questioned Averdall forcing herself back to the task at hand.

“My father!” answered Averdall promptly. “He’s the best person ever!”

“Thank you,” Holly said calmly. She rose and faced the rest of the Hall. “GRYFFINDOR!” she announced loudly. The students all clapped politely. But Holly caught a flash of uncertainty and confusion from Averdall. She looked at him and saw him staring about the Hall. Holly did so as well. For the first time she noticed all the usual flags and house colours denoting the various Houses within the Hall were missing. What had happened to them? When? “That way,” she whispered to Averdall and pointed to the Gryffindor table. The students at the Gryffindor table clapped politely and several students scooted aside to let Averdall sit with them. The Gryffindor emotions were uncertain, no doubt partly because Averdall didn’t look like Gryffindor material. But he was still Gryffindor; Holly was certain.

Holly turned and looked at Richards expectantly. “Next?”

Richards looked down on his page. “Uh, “Bromadge, Galina!”

A tall black haired girl with braids and wire-rimmed glasses confidently stepped forward and sat on the chair. She held out her hands without being asked. Holly took the hands and looked at the fingers with bright blue fingernail polish. “Do you like puzzles?” Holly asked looking up into Bromadge’s blue eyes. Bromadge nodded. “And reading?” She nodded again.

“What’s your favorite subject?”

“Ancient Egypt—and hieroglyphics!” Bromadge told Holly proudly.
“Of course,” murmured Holly. She stood. “RAVENCLAW!” Holly announced loudly. Everyone clapped again and Holly pointed to the proper table. Bromadge slid off the stool and proudly walked to the Ravenclaw table.

“Bromadge, Geoffrey!” A tall thin boy with black hair came forward, no glasses. Similar builds and similar emotions, but not totally the same; yes, definitely related. Bromadge walked up to the stool and sat down with confidence. He held out his hands for Holly to take.

“Twins!” thought Holly with surprise. She hadn’t been expecting that.

“You’d better put me in Ravenclaw!” Bromadge hissed as Holly took his hands.

“You sure?” Holly asked as she knelt. “I’d have pegged you as a Slytherin!” she whispered back. Did the Sorting Hat split families? Could you? Should you?

“Uh.” Bromadge seemed taken aback by Holly’s words.

“You’re proud,” she whispered. “And you know where you’re going… Just like Richards, here. But I’ll put you in Ravenclaw, if that’s what you really want… What do you like to do in your free time?” Holly asked in a louder voice, one that could be easily overheard.

“Uh, eat, play, read and, uh, pirates…”

It was all pretty much lies; but Holly let him ramble on. Bromadge was obviously repeating what Averdall had said as a stall while thinking about what Holly had said… “Who do you admire the most?” she asked when Bromadge fell silent.

“My father, of course,” he answered promptly. But that was a lie too. Holly wondered what the family was like.


He started at that; perhaps he hadn’t realized reading truth from lies was an Empath’s best strength. “Ravenclaw,” he muttered. His emotions, though, reflected uncertainty. Holly pondered the situation. No matter what Bromadge said, his personality just didn’t match.

“SLYTHERIN!” she called out deciding he only wanted in Ravenclaw because his sister was—but he wouldn’t be happy there.

Bromadge slid off the seat. “I’ll get it changed later,” he hissed to Holly as she pointed to the Slytherin table, “when there’s a real Sorting!”

“Of course,” agreed Holly easily and Bromadge walked off towards the Slytherin table. She doubted Bromadge would contest her declaration; who but a Slytherin would have the arrogance to demand everything his way at a Sorting and then protest the decision! Across the way Holly saw the sister cheerfully stick her tongue out at her brother. Holly was sure he did the same back. “Both in the same House?” Holly mentally shuttered at the thought. That would have been a real nightmare!

Holly turned and looked expectantly at Richards.

“D’Airelle, Winston!” A slim, dark skinned boy of averaged height with curly black hair stepped forward…

Cool, easy confidence… Ravenclaw or Slytherin? Holly asked a few questions to be sure first. “RAVENCLAW!” she shouted. D’Airelle sauntered over to the Ravenclaw table without needing directions…

“Febland, Oliver.” A skinny boy with blond hair stepped up to the chair. He sat down and held out his hands. Warm and open, cheerful disposition… His placement would be easy. “What do you like to do?” asked Holly… “HUFFLEPUFF!” she called out a bit later.

“Jha, Onella!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

“Nithercott, Nelda!”

“GRYFFINDOR!”

“Nolan, Alastair!”

“GRYFFINDOR!”

“Mallick, Taj”

“SLYTHERIN”

“Seth, Faraz!”
“HUFFLEPUFF!”
On and on the names were called and Holly did her best to sort them; some were easier than others to place; she hoped she had done right by each. When the last First, Wanda Woodbead, a redhead girl with pale skin and freckles, skipped off towards the Hufflepuff table, Holly drew a sigh of relief. The sorting was over.
“That concludes the Sorting,” announced Anthony Richards importantly. “We should all thank, Wycliff, ah, Miss Wycliff for her efforts.” The students in the Hall applauded politely, as did Anthony. Wycliff seemed uncomfortable with the attention and praise. Perhaps it was because she knew she didn’t deserve it; Anthony was of the opinion that the questions Wycliff had asked helped her determine proper placement more than any emotions she had felt. But that didn’t matter. What mattered was that the Firsts no longer stood stranded in the center of the Hall. Anthony turned to Wycliff. “Thank you,” he told her in a sincere voice. “It couldn’t have been done without you.” Wycliff stared at Anthony without comment. Anthony moved closer. “Is everyone hungry?” he asked in a whisper. He knew the answer already; a long day on the train and a longer than usual sorting by Wycliff. Everyone’s stomachs would be growling as much as his. It would be nice if Wycliff confirmed it.

Wycliff regarded Anthony with wide eyes and an otherwise expressionless face. “Ask them, not me” she told him softly and turned away heading for the Hufflepuff table—no, Anthony saw her retreat to her original location against the wall, wand again drawn defensively. That was not good. Anthony had hoped that some praise and sincere compliments would make her more willing to continue working with him, but he would worry about that later.

He turned his attention back to the students. “After the Sorting,” he told the group; actually, he was talking to the Firsts, now scattered about the Hall, “we have dinner to celebrate our new house members. Unfortunately, we don’t seem to have any house elves to bring it… But that doesn’t mean there isn’t any food. I propose the Prefects of each house go to the Kitchen and see if there is any food and bring it back.”

“Are you kidding!” exploded Prefect Owain Gruffudd (S6.) “I’m no house elf and I don’t fetch or carry for anyone!”

“Of course not,” agreed Anthony while walking up to Gruffudd. “But this is a different situation,” he told him while speaking loud enough for everyone else to hear. “We need someone both trustworthy and skilled to go to the kitchen. As a prefect, you are both. Skilled because you’ll have to somehow transport all the food to the Hall. And trustworthy because we would only take the word of the Prefects if there isn’t any food.” There was lots of murmuring at this. Probably they hadn’t considered the possibility of “no food.” Anthony hadn’t been thinking of much else since that owl returned. He hadn’t had a chance to eat snacks on the train. Anthony’s stomach had been growling nonstop, and the unthinkable thought had occurred: what if, besides no house elves, and no professors, there was no food?

Anthony stepped up even closer to Gruffudd. “Would you believe the other prefects without seeing for yourself there was no food?” he asked. “I wouldn’t unless one of ours said so as well. But if you really don’t want to do this,” he added softly, loud enough to be heard on the Slytherin table but not by the other Houses, “You don’t have to.” Gruffudd leaned back in obvious satisfaction. “I’m sure I can find someone else to take your place and title.” Anthony looked significantly at Scorpius as he spoke. Scorpius (S6) had a smug smile on his face and nodded quickly in agreement. Anthony knew Scorpius had been upset at not being named Prefect like his father… He’d jump at the chance to change things.

Gruffudd saw Scorpius’s eager expression and frowned. “I suppose we’d better go along to make sure the other prefects don’t try to cheat us of our fair share!” he said rather loudly with his usual confident swagger. He rose.

“We need to discuss the owl first!” voiced someone from the Gryffindor table. Anthony identified the speaker as Hugo Weasley (G3). A Potter! Of course! They’d be bursting to take the lead and talk about the owl.

“Actually, we don’t,” put in another voice from the Ravenclaw table. Anthony recognized the speaker as Prefect Jeremy Corner (R7). “We’ve already figured out the owl never managed to deliver
the message,” he continued. “Or should have,” Corner added when one of the younger Slytherins, Vincent Crabbe (2nd year) voiced, “It didn’t?” (Crabbe was always kind of thick.)

Corner was also the Head Boy. In Anthony’s opinion, Corner was a rather boring student with a lackluster personality ill suited for the responsibility of Head Boy. It hadn’t taken much convincing to get Corner to agree to let him (Anthony) lead the prefect meeting on the train. As a result, Anthony’s mind had already filled with other ways to take over the Head Boy’s position as well.

“What we don’t know is whether there is any food…” Corner continued. “I say we check it out.”

“But—”

“We’ll make better decisions on a full stomach,” Corner explained.

“And if there’s no food?” asked Avery darkly.

“Then that information can be factored into the decisions we make afterwards,” Corner answered bluntly. “Come along!” he suggested rising from his bench and drawing his wand. “Don’t do anything serious while we’re gone,” he added aloud to no one in particular as he stepped briskly down the Hall to the doors. Prefect and Head Girl Jennifer Woods (H7) rose from her Hufflepuff table and joined him. The rest of the Prefects followed.

Corner opened the doors to the Great Hall, looked beyond, and then turned back to the group.

“Oh, the rest of you might want to consider separating your luggage into houses or something while you’re waiting, or not…” Corner and the rest of the Prefects left the Great Hall closing the huge doors behind them. His parting words further confirmed in Anthony’s mind Corner’s unsuitableness to be Head Boy. Corner should have given definite orders if he wanted something done not left it to student discretion.

The students all looked at each other after the Prefects left. For a moment Anthony wondered about telling everyone to get their luggage but decided against it. It would look as if he were following Corner’s lead. After a moment, some of the Hufflepuffs stood up and headed towards the doors. They were followed by some of the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws.

“This works,” said Warrington coolly. “They can sort and the rest will be ours!”

“A Sickle a bag!” announced Nicholas Adderson abruptly while adjusting the thick glasses on his nose, (S5.) Adderson’s usually stringy blond hair was tied back with a green ribbon this year.

“What?” questioned Ivy Malfoy, (S3.)

“A Sickle a bag to watch your things and make sure the other students don’t get into any of them while they’re sorting,” he explained confidently.

“Twenty Knuts a bag or two Sickles per person for all your things,” volunteered Rebecca Corwin (S4). She liked to make money too and could be usually counted on to undercut Adderson but sometimes Adderson gave better deals than Corwin.

“Done!” pronounced Marella Avery promptly with a toss of her wavy red-brown hair. Adderson scowled. “Gotta take a leak!” he muttered and swiftly exited the hall.

“Pay up!” said Corwin cheerfully while holding out her hand. “Double if you expect to pay when you get your bag… Any leftovers will be turned over to the Gryffindors as “lost and found,” she promised. The threat worked. No one wanted the Gryffindors to go through their bags. Despite the rules and warnings, there were probably all sorts of contraband items secreted within the bags, things the students didn’t want found or confiscated. Soon all the Slytherins, Anthony included, were digging into their pockets.

“I can’t afford that!” whined Poppy MacNair (2nd year.) She probably could, but she was a cheapskate. “It’s not like we get to go to Hogsmeade!” she added as an excuse. Several other students, all First and Second Years, nodded in agreement. Shopping at Hogsmeade was the main reason students brought extra coins to Hogwarts.

“You have a point,” agreed Corwin. “Fifteen knuts per bag or a Sickle per person for all First and Second Years!” she decided aloud. “But only if you pay up now. After that you’ll be schlepping
for me all fall to pay it off!” The First and Second Years quickly fished out several bronze and/or silver coins. Corwin collected the money rapidly.

“Thank you everyone,” she said happily when they had finished. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve some luggage to watch.” Corwin rapidly left the room. Waiting for her outside would be Adderson, already watching the bags. Last year Anthony found out that the two actually worked together—one charged the higher price making the lower price look more attractive and then they split the profits. He hadn’t yet decided how to use the information, probably demand a kickback of some sort, but not today. He had something else he wanted to take care of.

Anthony looked around the Hall. Half the Ravenclaws were at their table deep in quiet conversation. It was the same for the Gryffindors, except they, the Potter clan mostly, were peering intently at some parchment laid flat on the table. The Hufflepuffs were all busy moving luggage and in the back near the wall, he found her—Wycliff.

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“You did what to her cat?” exclaimed Paige in a scandalized voice. Anthony had been describing the spells he could already do while preparing for the O.W.L.S. make-up exam, which he was certain he didn’t need. “How could you?” continued Paige. “I helped heal that cat!”

“It just seemed like the thing to do!” answered Anthony defensively. And it had, though Anthony couldn’t quite explain why. Certainly they could have caged the cat and put on a silencing spell so it wouldn’t bother any

of them but transfiguring and putting the cat on display in front of Wycliff had made so much more sense at the time…

“Is she all right?”

“What? The cat? Of course!” assured Anthony though in truth he didn’t really know.

No one reported seeing the cat after they transfigured it and when they un-transfigured the goblet, well, it wasn’t a cat, but Wycliff hadn’t pestered them for the cat after that so it must be all right...

“You must make your amends with Wycliff as soon as possible!” insisted Paige.

“Why?” asked Anthony unrepentant. “It’s just a cat!”

“It’s Wycliff’s cat!”

“So? She’s just a Hufflepuff!” replied Anthony dismissively.

“Wycliff is a Hufflepuff who has the support of all the Hufflepuffs.”

“That’s just how Hufflepuffs are,” replied Anthony. “They stick together,” he added repeating what Paige had taught him.

“She is also a Potter with the support of the Potters and those who support Potter,” reminded Paige. “In addition, Wycliff is popular within the magical community. Angering her could anger them and may adversely affect all your future plans.”

“Seriously?” scoffed Anthony. “Wycliff is a “tool” for those bold enough to use her!” he stated repeating what Paige had once said when the Slytherins had first realized she was an Empath.

“At one time, perhaps,” agreed Paige. “But no more. Sir tried to make Wycliff a tool and failed. Wycliff has become stronger because of that experience. At most, Wycliff may be cultivated as an asset,
but only if she shared common goals with the cultivator and only if she wished.”

“O.K., so how do I make amends?” Anthony had no immediate plans to make amends, but agreeing to do so would get Paige off his case. Besides, Paige had successfully coached Anthony on making other convincing apologies… It could be useful to have Wycliff as an asset.

“I cannot help you on that,” Paige answered regretfully. “Wycliff is also an Empath and will not trust easily.

Making amends with Wycliff will require honesty instead of acting; she will know the truth behind your words and will know if you lie.”

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Wycliff was stacking the luggage brought in by the other students behind the Hufflepuff table. While Anthony had never seriously intended to “make amends” with Wycliff, he had seen for himself the influence she had over the other students; no one had objected after Wycliff agreed to sort and no one questioned her decisions. Unfortunately, Anthony had no idea how to make amends.

He watched while Wycliff stacked the luggage neatly. Smith (H6) brought in some more pieces of luggage while Wycliff worked, and set it down next to Wycliff. Wycliff proceeded to stack it as well. It would have been easier to use her wand and a Wingardia Leviosa spell but she didn’t. Mudbloods rarely used their wands to their full potential. On the other hand, Anthony suddenly remembered how stinky Wycliff’s wand was whenever she used it; perhaps it was a good idea Wycliff didn’t use it… Anthony stepped behind the Hufflepuff table as Owens brought in another load of luggage.

“What do you want?” Wycliff asked as she continued working.

“To help,” answered Anthony. As proof, he drew out his wand. “Wingardia Leviosa!” he said while pointing his wand at a trunk Owens (H6) had brought in. The trunk rose gently in the air and slid into place against the wall. Anthony smiled. “See what a little wand work will do?” he questioned triumphantly.

Wycliff paused in what she was doing and looked at Anthony. No, she seemed to look through Anthony! In that instant, Anthony realized he had not fooled Wycliff with his assistance.

“Why?” asked Wycliff bluntly. Not bothering to wait for an answer, she turned, physically lifted the next bag and placed it on top of the other.

“Wingardia Leviosa!” Anthony said again pointing his wand at a second bag. He floated it into place on top of the trunk against the wall. Paige was right. Wycliff would know the truth no matter how he answered. It was best to say nothing and let Wycliff draw her own conclusions.

The two worked together re-stacking the luggage without speaking.

“That’s it!” exclaimed Owens as he set down two more bags. “Except…” He paused and looked at Anthony as if wondering whether to say more.

Wycliff followed his glance and looked at Anthony too. Then she shrugged. “Except what?” she questioned aloud.

“There’s none of the Firsts’ luggage,” he announced bluntly.

“What?”

“I don’t think it got taken off the train…” Owens added speculatively. “Especially if there are no house elves…”

“What?!” questioned Anthony mentally in sudden panic. He’d left his luggage on the train as he had followed the Firsts on the boats! Was his luggage gone too?

“Hey Holly!” came a new voice—that of Fitzpatrick coming over from the Gryffindor table.

“We’ve got some bad news!”

“What?” asked Anthony involuntarily.
“I said Holly, not you,” growled Fitzpatrick. “What are you doing here anyway? Take a hike!” he ordered. His steely blue eyes flashed angrily at Anthony.

“Never mind,” said Albus Potter coming up behind Fitzpatrick. “It’s no secret, or won’t be for long. If Richards wants to be leader, then he can tell the Slytherins!”

“Tell them what?”

“That we found the professors.”

“You did? Where?”

“At Hogwarts!”

“Very funny,” answered Anthony.

“No, seriously,” answered Potter without humour. “They’re at Hogwarts! We’re not! This isn’t Hogwarts!”

“You’re still a nutter!” laughed Anthony as he looked around the Great Hall. How could this not be Hogwarts!

But Wycliff wasn’t laughing. Her face got even paler, if possible. “No!” she whispered. “I’ve got to get out of here now!” she said urgently and drew her wand. She waved it and vanished with a “crack” and a puff of pungent smoke—and reappeared almost immediately! “No!” she screamed as she staggered to the floor.

“Winky!” Wycliff called out. A house elf with a bulbous tomato red nose in a snowy-white pillowcase shift instantly appeared. “Take me home now!” Wycliff ordered. The house elf promptly grabbed Wycliff’s wrist and the two vanished with a loud “crack.” They re-appeared immediately! They vanished a second time, and a third reappearing after each time.

After the fourth reappearance the house elf let go of Wycliff and started to sob loudly. “I tries and tries but I can’t!” she wailed between the tears. The elf’s thin body moved up and down with the sobs as she continued to cry. The Hufflepuff students gathered quickly around Wycliff. Their bodies hid her from view. But Anthony had already seen Wycliff’s tightly curled body on the floor. Anthony stared at the scene in disbelief.

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“You should leave,” Smith told Anthony firmly stepping in front of him invading his personal space forcing Anthony to take a step backwards, and another. Anthony backed away slowly all the while watching the rest of the Hufflepuffs sort of fold around Wycliff and the sobbing house elf.

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been so quick to take your money (and his) without learning more…”

“Dinner!” announced a voice loudly.

Anthony looked up and saw Corner walking in with the other prefects. Each pair of House prefects floated a huge board filled with food and dishes. No, it wasn’t a board but a door! They had managed to take down four doors somewhere and used them as huge platters. How dare they deface Hogwarts like that! On the other hand, was it really Hogwarts they were defacing? Each door was floated to a House table and gently placed on top. Impressive, actually. It had made sense to send the prefects, but in reflection, asking 8 students to bring back enough food for 200 plus had been a tall order.

Several students spontaneously cheered at the prefects’ arrival; others hurried forward to help the prefects put the food on the tables. Prefects Gruffydd and O’Shea proudly deposited their door on the table and ordered the Firsts to distribute the plates and service ware that came with the food. It looked delicious, a proper Hogwarts spread, but not the “first night” kind of food. It was all rather cold, too.

Anthony reached out and grabbed a pasty and listened while the prefects described their experiences getting the food. The group found food waiting on the counters but nothing in the ovens or cupboards. More accurately, the cupboards and oven wouldn’t open! Corner tried to blast them open and nothing happened. The doors had come from the kitchen, two at the entry and two others that led nowhere—the doors opened but there was a stone wall behind each! The news was disquieting to say the least.

Anthony nibbled on his pasty half listening to the conversation while he looked around the room trying to judge the best time to start talking. He had promised they would talk about things after they had eaten. It was a scary prospect. Letting the students talk could give some other student the opportunity to step in and try to take over. Anthony considered the students present and tried to calculate the opposition he’d encounter.

First and foremost, were the 7th years. They could claim leadership by virtue of their age—being the oldest there. Of them, the two with the most justification behind a bid for leadership were the Head Boy and Girl. The Head Girl Woods was Hufflepuff; she was unlikely to try to lead. Corner, being Ravenclaw, might, but so far hadn’t shown much desire in that direction. The rest of the prefects had accepted Anthony’s lead, so far. Of the non-sevenths, the Potter name was big, but no one would follow Albus Potter; he was a “nutter.” The other Potter was too young and a girl…That left Fitzpatrick as a strong contender—he’d already tried once and would likely try again.

“Who locked the bathroom?” complained Vincent Crabb as he returned to the table. His words distracted Anthony from his other thoughts. “You’d think they’d have everything repaired properly in time for the new school year!” he added righteously.

“So what’d you do?” questioned Ivy Malfoy.

“What’d you think?” retorted Crabb. “I wasn’t going to hike around to find another!”

“If you went into our bathroom,” she began threateningly.

“That or the wall!” he answered back. “And I didn’t think the ghosts would like that!”

“Ghosts!” thought Anthony suddenly. Why hadn’t he seen any? They should have surely come out to visit by now!

“What do you think you’re doing telling all the Firsts to settle for two sickles?” hissed Corwin angrily in Anthony’s ear. “Their luggage wasn’t even there in the first place!”

“Nor was mine!” informed Anthony while holding out his hand.

“Should have been a full refund at most, not double!” continued Corwin while placing two sickles in Anthony’s hand.

“Shouldn’t have made promises you couldn’t keep,” reminded Anthony blandly. “Bad for business. And that’s four sickles for me!” he insisted while keeping his hand out. “I’m not a First! Pay up or I tell everyone you’re working with Adderson to set the price!”

“When did you get to be so stingy!” complained Corwin as she placed two more coins in Anthony’s hand.

“Since I started working with the vendors on Diagon Alley,” answered Anthony as his hand
closed around the coins. Had this happened last year, Anthony would have never thought to get more than a full refund back. “Trust me, they’d have made you pay triple for pulling a stunt like this!”

“What stunt?”

“Over pricing and then not delivering!” answered Anthony promptly while he pocketed the money. “Gives everyone a bad name.

“Wait a minute!” Corwin exclaimed. “Why am I paying you for lost luggage? You’re not a First!”

“But I left my luggage on the Express with the rest of the Firsts when I joined them on the boat,” Anthony informed her. Of course, he had neglected to pay them to watch it in the first place... With all the money changing hands, Anthony doubted Corwin or Adderson would notice. If they did, well, it was their own fault for not keeping better track. If they didn’t well, Anthony would be paying the money back to them soon enough; he would need more supplies soon and the cheesy overpriced rejects the two would palm off on the Firsts would not do for him. “Now, if I were you Anthony continued aloud. "I’d start scrounging up all the spare pieces of clothing you can find before anyone else thinks to do it.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Who do you think is going to need replacement supplies and now has a bit of extra change to get it?”

Corwin’s face brightened immediately. “Thanks for the tip,” she said appreciatively and immediately headed down the table to Adderson. She whispered something in his ear. The two got up and left the Hall.

Anthony looked around the table; the Slytherins were pretty much done eating. He took a look around the Hall. The Gryffindors and Ravenclaws seemed finished too. The food on the Hufflepuff table looked untouched. The Hufflepuffs were all hovering over Wycliff. They probably hadn’t felt much like eating. After seeing Wycliff, Anthony hadn’t either. He pulled an apple off the table and tucked it in his robes for later. Then Anthony took a deep breath and stepped to the front of the Hall.

“I have some announcements to make before we get down to business,” began Anthony loudly talking over the hum of conversation made by the other students. The hall quieted down, the students were no doubt curious to hear what he would say. “First, the boy’s bathroom is broken so we’ll all be using the girls bathroom until it gets repaired.” There was some loud grumblings but nothing serious; apparently most of the hall already knew that and had made “adjustments” accordingly.

“Second, the owl definitely did not make its delivery.” Anthony was guessing on that but nobody corrected him. Several students twisted around in their bench turning their back on Anthony; the owl was old news. “That’s a good thing,” continued Anthony in a confident voice. “As the message was totally bogus.” The room quieted totally. He had their attention now. “It seems as if the Professors aren’t lost at all! They’re at Hogwarts!”

“Right!” responded Warrington sarcastically. “Then where are they?” Anthony was not surprised by her response. The Slytherins were probably the only ones who didn’t know what happened to Wycliff or why; Anthony had deliberately not told them knowing they would never believe him or the source. He wasn’t sure he believed it but Wycliff’s reaction was pretty convincing and everyone else seemed to take the news seriously.

“Corner? You prefects learn anything else while getting the food?” Anthony asked ignoring Warrington.

“About the Professors?” asked Corner. “No.” Warrington gave a smug smile. “But there’s walls behind some of the doors in the kitchen, a wall where the cellar entrance should be, and the portraits don’t talk. Added to the missing professors, house elves and thestrals all seem to suggest that, however convincing this place looks, we are not at Hogwarts!”

“That’s impossible!” repeated Warrington flatly.

“Didn’t you pass your Apparating test?” questioned Anthony. He knew she had; Anthony had
heard her boasting about it on the train.

“What? Of course!”

“Then perhaps you could demonstrate for us all—Apparate to the door.”

“I can’t do that!” she protested. “This is Hogwarts and everyone knows you can’t Apparate in Hogwarts.”

“Exactly,” agreed Anthony. “But if you can Apparate from there to the door, then this definitely isn’t Hogwarts!”

“But it can’t be done!” she argued.

“Or you can’t do it and all that boasting on the train was just hot air!” Anthony challenged.

“Anyone else here know how to Apparate?” he threw the question out to the rest of the Hall.

“Oh, all right!” snapped Warrington. She pulled out her wand, waved it and vanished! The expression of surprise on her face when she reappeared by the door was obvious to all.

“Now, try Apparating to Hogsmeade!” suggested Anthony not giving Warrington chance to speak. She nodded and waved her wand again. Warrington vanished and reappeared almost instantly kind of staggering to her knees. She waved her wand a second time, vanished and reappeared again!

“Which brings us to the final piece of information,” stated Anthony dryly. “It would seem that we may be prisoners…”

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It took a while for the commotion to die down. Despite the facts being out there, perhaps the other students hadn’t put it all together as Anthony had or perhaps they had, but just hadn’t dared to voice it out loud. Anthony knew how they felt; saying it aloud made everything seem frighteningly real and unreal.

Some students persisted in thinking it was all some sort of horrible joke; “There’s no kidnapper, no bars; the doors aren’t locked, we have our wands; how can we be prisoners?” voiced a disbelieving Gryffindor.

“Just because you can’t Apparate out, means nothing!” argued a Ravenclaw. “We rode in; we can just ride out!”

“There’s no thestrals!” reminded the Weasley boy.

“So we walk!” suggested Shirley Ogg (S6.) “Can’t take that long to get to Hogsmeade. Whatever barrier the owl encountered will be no match for all of us!” she assured confidently. She drew out her wand. “I know some real destructive spells,” she added waving it suggestively.

“Saying the spell collectively does seem to strengthen a spell,” agreed Corner speculatively.

“Least it did last year…” He was obviously referring to the group effort to destroy the wands last spring.

“If there’s any way to get out now then we should do it!” voiced Hufflepuff Head Girl Jennifer Woods. She didn’t say anything else, but somehow her words ended the discussion. Anthony could guess why. Wycliff. Her absence from the conversation was painfully obvious to Anthony.

Accordingly, the whole student body (except Wycliff) drew their wands, left the Great Hall (and their luggage) and walked down the road. Some of the Hufflepuffs carried an unresisting Wycliff along. Night had fallen; the stars twinkled invitingly above as they walked. The trip seemed to take forever—and ended too soon—at the gate!

No amount of spells or team spells could get that gate to open! Everyone had a try at it. Then the students tried to go over it. But Wingardia Leviosa couldn’t lift a student high enough; there was some sort of invisible barrier that stretched up from the gate as far as the students could reach. Perhaps a broom could go higher and get over it, but no one had one, well they did, but the brooms were buried under all the other luggage and the students who owned them hadn’t thought to bring one along. Some of the students spread into the surrounding woods looking for a way past the gate. They returned and reported some sort of barrier on either side only a couple of meters from the road… Other students attempted to dig down beneath the wall but encountered a hard smooth rock or some other substance a few centimeters down that they could not break…
After the students ran out of ideas to try, Anthony declared it was time to go back to the castle promising they should return in the morning and try again when there was better light… No one argued. The mood was grim. Everyone was tired and discouraged.

When they neared the castle entrance Anthony noticed someone making his way through the crowds in the opposite direction. It was Adderson. “We’ve a problem!” he began without formalities when he drew near to Anthony.

“Oh?” questioned Anthony aloud. “What else?” It was great that the younger students were coming to him first, looking to him for advice and guidance, but did he want any more problems? “There’s no dorm!” he whispered urgently.

“Huh?”

“We’ve tried the new password, the old password and every password we could think of but it wouldn’t open!” Adderson continued. He and Corwin had rushed to the castle early to take the luggage down to the dorm (no doubt intending to charge for the service, of course.) Learning from the lost luggage experience, they had decided to check out the dorm first. “We even tried blasting the entry open—and there was a wall behind it!”

It seemed like too much but Anthony managed to keep his thoughts to himself and his expression calm! Anthony nodded. “Thanks,” he told Adderson. “I’ll take care of it.” Anthony made his way to Ravenclaw Corner and told him the news. Corner immediately pulled out his wand and Apparated, presumably to check out his dorm. Then Anthony told Hufflepuff Woods and Gryffindor Prefect Alexia Finnegan (she was 7th year and could Apparate.) Both pulled out their wands and instantly vanished, presumably to check out their own dorms.

All three were waiting for the students when they got back into the Great Hall; there was no Hufflepuff or Gryffindor dorm either. Surprisingly, the Ravenclaw Dorm was there complete with a boys bathroom. Despite its presence, the Ravenclaws were uncertain of the safety of the dorm. Perhaps it was a macabre attempt to separate the Ravenclaws from the rest of the students…

By common consent everyone decided to sleep in the Great Hall. The Ravenclaws brought down sheets, blankets, mattresses and pillows from their dorm. Using the Gemino spell they were able to duplicate enough to share with the rest of the students. The spell would wear off after a while and would have to be renewed regularly for continued usage but it would do for the night. The Gryffindors posted a guard and everyone found a spot in the Hall to lie down. The lights were dimmed and the exhausted students tried to sleep.
“What do you mean they’re not there?” growled Dudley dangerously.
“I mean they’re not there!” answered Harry Potter in a low voice trying to keep all emotion out of it. “The Hogwarts Express took off on schedule this morning and did not arrive at Hogsmeade.”
“The whole train?” whispered Laurel in disbelief. “How can that be?”
“I don’t know,” answered Harry. “We don’t know,” he added correcting himself. “But it’s not there; it … didn’t … arrive.”
“So where is it?”
“We don’t know.”
“Did it crash?”
“No; at least we don’t think so.”
“Don’t think so?”
“We can’t find it!” Harry repeated helplessly. “It didn’t arrive! No one saw it crash or anything else! We’ve flown the whole route—followed the tracks and found nothing! It’s just … gone!”
“But the people on the train?” whispered Laurel looking fearfully down at the small oval pendant with a silver chain that she wore around her neck. It was a Healthstone, Holly’s Healthstone. In the past, the stone had changed colour according to Holly’s health. Today the pendant shimmered reassuringly like an opal showing hints of other colors within. “What about them?” she continued referring to the people on the train.
“They’re gone too!” Harry answered bleakly. “All of them!”
“The students?”
“Yeah, the students,” confirmed Harry. “All two hundred and fifty-eight.”
Word got out before dinner that the train hadn’t arrived. Food had been forgotten! Wizard parents gathered at Hogsmeade looking for some trace of their children; they’d found nothing. The Ministry spent the rest of the evening hunting for the train; flying everywhere trying to figure out what happened. They’d gotten nowhere. Professor Trelawney locked herself in her room and was trying to find them through divination. She reported they were alive, but that was it. The Healthstones had said as much too, if they were to be believed. McGonagall insisted the Muggle parents be notified. It was not a matter that could wait a day or two. Perhaps they had information or news the wizard parents hadn’t. So despite the late hour (11:00pm) the Ministry had sent representatives to each family to inform them personally of the situation. Dudley and his family were unplottable. It was left to Harry to notify them.
“Could they have been kidnapped?” questioned Laurel fearfully.
“Maybe,” admitted Harry. “There’s been no ransom note, though; we just don’t know.” Just the thought of someone kidnapping his children, let alone a whole trainload of children was beyond comprehension.
“What’s going on?” Dudley questioned. “Where is it?”
Harry shook his head helplessly. Winky was the only house elf that didn’t actually live in the house. “The other house elves,” Harry said softly, “mine included, they came when we called but they couldn’t FETCH!” Kreacher had been inconsolable; Harry had left him still crying, still trying to FETCH.
“So what does that mean?”
“I don’t know,” Harry admitted, “but I’m hoping it means that Winky is with Holly, wherever she is,” answered Harry carefully. “And maybe with the rest of the students too— with Albus and Lily!” Harry added mentally. “House elves are pretty powerful creatures,” Harry informed the two.
“I asked Winky to stay with Holly. She was on the train with Holly. Hopefully she’s with her now—
“What are we going to do about Richards?” demanded Gryffindor Prefect Taylor O’Daniels (6th year.)

“What do you mean?” questioned Hufflepuff Prefect Lynette Huckaby (5th year.) The prefects were gathered together in the girls’ bathroom on the second floor. It was 1:00am. The Slytherin Prefects were not invited to the meeting, nor was the Headmistress’ new Assistant, Anthony Richards.

Once defunct and decrepit, the bathroom had been cleaned and fixed up five years earlier as a class assignment given to Holly Wycliff. Now it was a beautiful bathroom with gleaming fixtures and spotless white floors. The only thing that seemed out of place were the thirteen Kelly green tiles each rimmed with a sparkly silver border that lay in the center of the bathroom floor. They were spotless too—washed by the frequent toilet overflows created by Moaning Myrtle; it was her bathroom—but she wasn’t here tonight. Her absence emphasized yet again the wrongness of the whole place that looked like Hogwarts.

“I mean he’s taken over!” persisted O’Daniels. “He’s trying to take charge of everything! He’s just an Assistant! You should be in charge, Corner or Woods!” Head Boy and Girl were selected among the 7th years. They did not have to be prefects.

“I don’t want the job,” stated Head Boy Jeremy Corner frankly. Jeremy was studying to be an auror. One qualification required of an auror, one not on the application form, was an aversion to publicity. Jeremy would have refused the appointment of Head Boy outright except Headmistress McGonagall had personally asked him to take it.

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“Richards is the only Slytherin who actually apologized for his behavior last year,” McGonagall had told Jeremy. “It was probably a total lie at the time,” she admitted, “but he told it well. So I’ve been keeping an eye on him ever since and made inquiries. Richards also apologized to the Ministry for his part in Pilkington’s Ball, which made a favourable impression on Wizard Thomas,” McGonagall informed Jeremy. “He scored better than average on his O.W.L.S. retest,” she added. “The vendors say Richards’ gotten pretty good at bargaining and Pilkington says Richards has been an acceptable assistant. All of that combines to indicate a rather promising young wizard…”

“So?”

“I like to give promising young wizards a chance to excell.”

“So let him be Head Boy,” suggested Jeremy.

“He isn’t 7th year,” replied McGonagall bluntly. “Besides, I can’t give Richards any real position, not after last year, but given half a chance, I’m sure he’ll will try to take on all the Head Boy responsibilities.”

“You want me to let him?” asked Corner in disbelief.

“Why not? He wants the job; you don’t; it’s a perfect match. Let Richards take on as much responsibility as he wishes and the credit. You can remain in the background and supervise. It’ll keep you out of the limelight”
“And if it doesn’t work?”
“It will work!” McGonagall insisted. “But if it doesn’t you tell me. I’ll rein Richards in or pull him out.”
“And leave me stuck being Head Boy with all the responsibilities?”
“Well, yes, that would happen,” mused McGonagall speculatively. “But only if Richards doesn’t work.
And I’m sure someone as bright as you will make sure that never happens...”

“How can you not want the job!” exploded O’Daniels in frustration.
“No,” answered Woods absently her face creased with worry. “Not really.” Jeremy thought he knew the reason for her worry.
“How’s Holly?” he asked with concern. He hadn’t been there when it happened, but word of Holly’s collapse had spread rapidly throughout the Ravenclaw table while they had eaten and helped confirm the conclusions he had drawn while getting the food.
Woods shook her head. “Not good,” she admitted. “We’ve spent the last year doing everything we could to insure something like this never happens to her again and it does anyway! It’s like she’s totally given up.”
Jeremy nodded with understanding. Holly had been twice captured by Sir and once by Umbridge. It did seem like a bit much. “But she’s not alone this time,” he reasoned aloud.
“We’ve told her that again and again but it doesn’t seem to matter,” answered Woods.
“This meeting isn’t about Wycliff,” persisted Gryffindor Prefect Alexia Finnegan (7th year.) “You’re Head Boy! You should be in charge! Or one of us! Anyone but Richards!”
“What’s wrong with Richards?” asked Jeremy mildly.
“Wrong? He’s Slytherin! That’s what!”
“So?”
“So? You remember what they did last year! Richards was in the thick of all that, I’m certain!”
“Probably,” agreed Jeremy. “But there was also Pettigrew’s Hand egging them on,” he reminded them. “There’s no hand this year. Holly stood next to Richards throughout the sorting. If there had been anything wrong with him she’d have said so.”
“But he’s Slytherin! How can you stand by and let him try to run things?”
“Because he is a Slytherin!” answered Jeremy. “We’re in a lot of trouble here,” he continued.
“Now, we can waste our time squabbling among ourselves or we can be working together to get out, all out! Richards hasn’t said or done anything out of line,” Jeremy reminded.
“Yeah,” agreed O’Daniels disgustedly. “He’s just gone along with the will of the group and made it all look like his idea!”
“Perhaps,” agreed Jeremy. “So where is the harm? More importantly, he has gotten the rest of the Slytherins to agree too!”
“Huh?”
“That’s the first time I’ve ever seen Gruffudd and O’Shea lift a finger for anybody let alone bring the food for the rest of the Slytherin students. They complained the whole time, but they did it. Richards clearly knows which buttons to push to get the other Slytherins to cooperate.
“I know which buttons to push too!” growled O’Daniels angrily.
“Through intimidation and fear?” questioned Corner. “Those methods are not worthy of a Gryffindor. Think about it. Right now we’re all working together. If one of us steps forward as leader, the Slytherins will resist that authority if only because that person isn’t Slytherin. There’ll be arguments and fights instead of cooperation. I don’t want that. Do you?”
“Better now than later,” insisted Finnegan.
“No!” spoke Huckaby firmly. “We can’t succeed if we don’t work together. We succeeded
last year when we worked together; we can succeed again.”

“Exactly!” said O’Daniels. “We worked just fine without the Slytherins. I say we do it again!”

“But the Slytherins aren’t the enemy,” reminded Ravenclaw prefect Alessa Moore (6th year.)

“They didn’t do this to us or themselves. If we argue amongst ourselves we waste valuable time and effort that could be used in finding a way out. Worse, we leave an opening for the real kidnapper to exploit. We must stay united and that unity must include the Slytherins!”

“But what if he abuses his authority and decides to play bully? Do you plan to stand by and let that happen?” questioned Finnegan.

“Of course not,” assured Jeremy. “None of us will. But we can’t let it get to that stage in the first place. We prefects must make sure Richards is never given the opportunity to become a bully.”

“What do you have in mind?”

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Chapter 8

Often, what may seem scary because it’s new or different may turn out to be not so scary at all. Such was the case with the Princess. “How do I know this?” you may ask. It is because the Princess sent letters home saying so. Would you like to hear her first one? Here it is:

“Dear Grandmum.
How are you? I am fine. The school is lovely. My room is very nice and I have already made a lot of friends…”

Anthony Richards blinked in surprise. Something was different. It took a while to figure it out; the tables were still filled with the remains of last night’s food, the doors that the food had been carried still leaned up against the wall... It was the fire! The fire in the fireplace burned brightly and a fresh supply of wood was stacked against the wall ready for use. It hadn’t been lit before and the firewood had been nearly gone.

Anthony had gotten up early to make plans for the day. After spending an hour making notes, he had decided to take a break. Anthony stood, stretched and looked around. Besides some Hufflepuffs sitting around Wycliff, the Gryffindor sentry, some pimply faced boy who looked terribly bored, was the only other person awake so Anthony figured it was a good time to “freshen up” in the bathroom (Girl’s.) Upon his return, Anthony discovered the fire and firewood. “Who started it?” he asked the sentry.

“Huh?” The sentry looked about in confusion. “Started what?”


“I don’t know,” the boy answered guiltily. “I didn’t see anything! I was looking the other way…”

“It’s O.K.,” Anthony said reassuringly. “It was probably the house elves,” though Anthony was fairly certain there were no house elves. He sat at the table and tried to decide what it meant.

Someone slid onto the bench next to him. Looking up Anthony recognized Head Boy Corner. He braced himself for a power confrontation. “This isn’t your table, Corner,” Anthony told him. “Go away.”

Corner ignored Anthony’s words and instead moved in closer invading Anthony’s personal space. Anthony would have slid away, but it was the Slytherin table. He would not be chased off it by a Ravenclaw.

“Based on your performance yesterday,” Corner began in a low voice, so low it could not be overheard by anyone but Anthony, “we have decided to give you a chance, kind of on probation, if you will.”

Anthony’s heart gave an involuntary leap! Did he just say what he thought he’d said? “Who’s ‘we?’” questioned Anthony cautiously. There had to be some catch—lots of catches.

“The prefects,” answered Corner, “and the houses for which they represent.”

“When did this happen?”

“Last night. This morning, actually.”

“I don’t remember calling a meeting.”

“You didn’t,” Corner answered. “We did.”

“I don’t recall the Slytherin Prefects mentioning or attending a meeting last night or this morning...”

“They weren’t invited,” answered Corner bluntly.

Anthony gave a mental shiver reminded yet again that he and the Slytherins were outnumbered and subject to the whims of the rest of the students.
“You can tell them we met, if you wish,” Corner continued conversationally, “or not. We didn’t think they’d object to one of their own staying in charge. If they do, perhaps you could persuade them otherwise.” Anthony nodded slowly. He could do that. He was McGonagall’s Assistant; the others couldn’t claim that.

“Probation?” questioned Anthony suddenly remembering what else Corner had said. “We’ll follow your lead, but not blindly,” Corner told him. “We’ll stay with you, if you stay focused on the common goal.”

“Common goal?”

“Getting out—all of us!”

Anthony gulped. It was as if the weight of the world had fallen upon his shoulders. Leadership was one thing but he hadn’t the foggiest idea how to get everyone out of here, wherever “here” was...

“We’ve selected some advisors to help you,” Corner continued as if reading Anthony’s mind. “I am perfectly capable of selecting my own advisors,” Anthony said crisply.

“Slytherin advisors?” Corner questioned shrewdly. Anthony didn’t answer.

“That won’t set well with the rest of the students. It’ll look like you’re playing favorites before you even begin. You need advisors from across the board.”

“Advisors or puppet-masters?” questioned Anthony sensing suddenly that the leadership Corner dangled in front of Anthony was a sham; Corner meant Anthony to be a figurehead, a puppet whose strings they intended to pull.

“That kind of depends on you,” answered Corner slowly. “Do you want the title and the acclaims or do you wish to actually lead?”

Anthony didn’t answer. Of course he wanted to lead and the title and the acclaims!

“You made a good start last night,” Corner continued not waiting for an answer. “That shows promise. But every good leader has the backing of good people behind him. Those who will tell him the truth and not just what he wishes to hear; advisors who share the same goal and are committed to finding ways to achieve them instead of selfishly currying favour for ulterior motives. It is up to you to take the information and advice you hear and make decisions to benefit the common good.”

Corner stood and walked away. Anthony stood too. He needed some space to think about things. He headed for the entryway. Two other students stepped forward towards him. Anthony recognized them as Ravenclaw Leila Pilkington (R6) and Gryffindor Conner Fitzpatrick (G6). They caught up with Anthony as he stepped outside the Great Hall. “What do you want?” Anthony questioned as they drew near.

“We’re your Advisors,” answered Fitzpatrick.

“I don’t need any advice,” Anthony said without stopping.

“That’s good,” said Pilkington. “As we really have no advice to give. ‘Cept maybe we should go down to the kitchen...”

“Kitchen?” questioned Anthony. “Why?” He automatically headed down the hall that led to the kitchen. It was as good a destination as any.

“Breakfast,” said Fitzpatrick succinctly. “Those leftovers won’t last long,” he told Anthony. Anthony instinctively felt for the apple in his pocket, the one he had place there the previous night. Yes, it was still there. “They brought up all the food from the kitchen last night,” Fitzpatrick informed Anthony. “If there isn’t any more in the kitchen today, you get to tell everyone the good news! Welcome to the joys of leadership.” Fitzpatrick smiled with relish as if anticipating the kind of reception Anthony would receive if he had to tell the students that kind of news...

“Are you here to help or sabotage me?” questioned Anthony.

“Haven’t decided yet,” answered Fitzpatrick bluntly. “Thought I’d wait and see what you did first...”

There was no answer to that. At least it was honest. Anthony wasn’t sure he liked such honesty. Anthony pulled out the apple and started to eat as he walked; at least he wouldn’t have to face these new problems on a totally empty stomach. Anthony reached the stairs and continued on his way down to the kitchen. Pilkington and Fitzpatrick followed. Anthony finished the apple and
tossed the core in one of the ornate garbage receptacles they passed. “What would you do if you were in charge?” Anthony asked finally. If he was stuck with them, he might as well see what they had to say.

“Probably keep the existing structure,” answered Pilkington.

“Structure?”

“Do everything through the prefects; let them manage affairs within their own houses like at Hogwarts,” she answered explaining. “Meeting with the whole student body is too cumbersome.”

Anthony nodded. He was planning to do something like that. It was reassuring to learn others would do the same thing...

“Telling all the Houses to work together was smart,” she added approvingly. “We share in the work, the information and rewards that way...”

“Look at that!” whistled Fitzpatrick softly.

“What?” They had reached the kitchen door.

“The door!” explained Fitzpatrick. “It’s here!”

“So?”

“It’s still upstairs leaning against the wall outside the Great Hall!” he reminded the two. “Or was.”

“If it’s still upstairs too then it’s a renewing spell of some sort,” concluded Pilkington as she studied the door.

“Let’s see if the food renewed as well,” said Fitzpatrick and he pushed the kitchen door open. Inside lay all sorts of food on the counter tops waiting to be served. “That’s a relief!” exclaimed Fitzpatrick. Privately, Anthony agreed. He was still hungry. He reached out, grabbed a new apple and took a bite. Sweet, juicy and crisp.

“It’s the same as last night,” observed Pilkington as she walked around the counters looking at the food.

“We should probably ration it, then,” said Fitzpatrick.

“Why?” questioned Anthony.

“Same food as last night!” repeated Fitzpatrick. “Not breakfast food. What makes you think there’s gonna be more food after this?”

“But surely we wouldn’t be starved?” questioned Anthony in disbelief.

“Hope for the best; plan for the worst!” stated Fitzpatrick. “We are trapped in an unknown location by person or persons unknown. What makes you think they intend to feed us all the time? For all we know this could be our last meal!”

Anthony shook his head in disbelief. “You’re crazy!” he exclaimed.

“No, the person who’s got us is crazy—crazy strong! He’s trapped 257 witches and wizards here. Why? What does he mean to do with us?”

“That’s why it’s so important we stay together,” put in Pilkington. “We have to be united to withstand whatever happens next.”

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“Is there anything else?” asked Anthony Richards. He was finishing up his first prefects meeting in “Hogwarts” or wherever they were. They sat at the table on the stage overlooking the rest of the Hall. Several students were already awake and up wandering quietly about the Hall, no doubt wondering about their next meal...

It had been a rather productive meeting. The Prefects would select other members of their house to accompany them to the kitchen and assist with bringing the food to the Great Hall. Sixteen students, (four per house, also selected by the Prefects) would walk back to the gate and follow the wall on either side in an attempt to find an opening. Another sixteen would split up and search the castle grounds taking note of whatever they could find. The rest of the students would split up in groups and search the castle, floor by floor looking for everything and anything odd, unusual or out of place.
“And if they find something out of place?” questioned one of the prefects.

“Leave it!” instructed Anthony. “Pass word to Malfoy, Scorpius Malfoy.”

“Malfoy?” questioned Finnegan with surprise. “Why him?”

“Malfoy’s spent the summer identifying and disarming dark items,” answered Anthony.

Scorpius had proudly related his efforts to clean out Pettigrew’s room. It apparently contained all sorts of priceless heirlooms and magical artifacts. “So he’s the most qualified person I know to deal with something dark. Unless you know of someone more qualified... an auror student maybe?”

Anthony looked around the group expectantly. The prefects looked at each other but no one spoke.

Anthony was not surprised. There probably weren’t any auror students. Aurors were a defunct profession. “Then it’s settled,” stated Anthony aloud. “Malfoy’s in charge of Dark Magic detection and removal.” That would make Scorpius happy. In addition, Anthony intended to ask Scorpius take a private survey of any contraband material the Slytherin students had brought with them. Possession of such items would have been severely punished had a professor found them while at Hogwarts, but here, they might come in useful.

“Then if there’s nothing else,” continued Anthony. “I’ll see you at lunch.” That’s when they would all meet together to report what they had learned. All the search teams would be instructed to return before lunch and make reports to the prefects and the prefects would report back to Anthony... Because each team had members from all the houses and would no doubt tell each other what they had found; there would be no need to report to the group as a whole. The luncheon prefect meeting would determine their next step based on the information acquired.

Anthony rose, happy to stretch his legs. The other students rose as well. “How’s Wycliff?” he asked Huckaby with concern in his voice.

Huckaby shook her head. “No better,” she reported.

“What’s wrong with her anyway?” asked O’Shea airily.

“She won’t eat,” answered Huckaby solemnly.

“Lucky you!” exclaimed O’Shea. “That means more for the rest of you!” O’Shea had been upset at the prospect that their portion of the food would have to be divided and made to last the full day; she was certain there would be more waiting for them at lunch.

“Then we can readjust our eating habits accordingly,” assured Anthony. “But until we know for sure, make it last!”

“I don’t think the Hufflepuffs would agree,” stated Anthony evenly.

“Probably not,” retorted O’Shea. “But then they’re used to giving Wycliff preferential treatment!” Anthony noted none of the prefects had left the table; he could feel their eyes on him.

“You know, I think the food should be divided by the number of people in each house instead of by the house,” added O’Shea righteously, “and if Wycliff won’t eat, then her portion should be distributed among the rest of us.” The hall grew deathly silent. It probably wasn’t but Anthony was only aware of O’Shea’s words and the rest of the prefects waiting to see how he would respond. But for Paige’s comments during the summer about Wycliff, Anthony might have never recognized how upset and offended the other prefects were at O’Shea’s words.

“The Hogwarts Code of Conduct demands that we treat each other with respect,” Anthony began in a low voice. He’d memorized the code in anticipation of enforcing it throughout the year... “Your words were not respectful towards Miss Wycliff and do not take into account her individual situation.”

“So?” asked O’Shea airily. “We’re not at Hogwarts!” she reminded Anthony. “So those rules don’t apply.”

“They do as long as I’m in charge,” answered Anthony keeping his voice low and under control. He knew a confrontation like this would come up eventually and already had some ideas on how to deal with it.

“That’s easily remedied,” replied O’Shea. “We’re not at Hogwarts so you’re not in charge and I shall speak any way I want!”
Anthony looked around at the other prefects watching. “You have food to get,” he reminded them. “We need a moment.” The other prefects backed away, out of direct hearing but instead of returning to their tables, they hovered in sight watching.

“We’re not at Hogwarts and I shall do as I please!” O’Shea repeated defiantly to Anthony.

“That would be very foolish!” replied Anthony.

“Yeah, right!” scoffed O’Shea.

Anthony stepped in close. “Remember last year?” he began softly in her ear. “At the Memorial? When the rest of the students dared draw on us? Remember how humiliating it was?”

“Yes!” agreed O’Shea and her eyes seemed to glow with anger.

“And how we vowed revenge?”

“Yes!”

“Well, now is not the time.”

“No, it’s the perfect time,” argued O’Shea. “No professors, no house points, no rules!”

“Exactly!” agreed Anthony. “Remember all the other things we did last year?” he questioned, “all the rules we broke and “tricks” we pulled—tricks that were not very nice...?”

“So?”

“The other students remember them too,” Anthony said while looking about the Hall, at all the students who filled the room, students who were now watching... “How long do you think it will take before it occurs to some of the them that this is the perfect opportunity for a little payback?”

“Huh?”

“They disarmed us!” reminded Anthony with repressed fury remembering all the shame and humiliation of that day. “And that was with professors present. What do you think they will do when the professors are not about?”

“But we’re b—”

“Better? Yes!” agreed Anthony. “But they out... number... us! We can fight back but we cannot hope to win—not with those odds! And there is nothing we can do to stop them, nothing except,” Anthony paused and let O’Shea dangle mentally on the prospect of being overwhelmed by inferiors, “—insist on a strict adherence to the Hogwarts rules! That way the first time one of them tries to do some payback, we can demand they follow the same rules!” He had O’Shea’s total attention now. “I shall insist everyone adheres to strict rules of courtesy and respect because if I don’t it is we Slytherins who will face the consequences!” he told her. “The rules shall protect us from retaliation, but only if we follow them too!”

Anthony cleared his throat and continued in a more formal voice. “According to the same Hogwarts rules, prefects are supposed to be examples for the students in their house. If you continue to show open disrespect for the other students in Hogwarts I shall be forced to remove the title of prefect from you and assign it to someone else, Ogg, perhaps.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“I would,” answered Anthony calmly, “because I will do what is necessary to protect myself.”

“The other students would never let you do that!” she exclaimed in protest.

“They will once they understand what is at stake,” Anthony answered ruthlessly. “Your disrespect affects all of us as will theirs should they be so foolish to express it.”

“You do bring up a good point about House points, however,” Anthony added thoughtfully. “It would be appropriate to consult the prefects for ideas for what we can do instead... I leave it to you to decide whether you wish to participate in this discussion as a prefect or experience the results of it after the fact.” Anthony turned and walked off the stage leaving O’Shea on her own. She had a lot to think about. It remained to be seen whether his words had any effect on her behavior.

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“I did it!” announced Vernon Wycliff excitedly as he entered his room. “Mr. Portermeyer said...” Vernon’s voice died away as he realized it wasn’t just his friend Kenny Perkins in the room.

“Hello Vernon,” came the quiet voice of the tall person in the rumpled plain gray suit who
stood at his arrival. “Congratulations on your new arrangement.”
“Cousin Harry,” said Vernon. “What are you doing here? Did you have something to do with that?” he accused suddenly. Vernon had no reason to think Cousin Harry had interfered with Vernon’s activities in any way, but the pervading suspicious nature of his father was easy to adopt.
“Of course not,” answered Cousin Harry. “Mr. Perkins here was telling me of your plans to trade computer repair services at the school for boarding expenses while we waited for your arrival. I’m glad they were successful.”
“Oh.” That made sense. “Uh, why are you here?”
“Your parents asked me to come,” answered Cousin Harry as he glanced over at Kenny. Kenny got the hint.
“I’ve got to go!” Kenny announced suddenly. “There’s, uh, a book I have to check out!” Kenny grabbed his bag and slid past Vernon. “See you later,” he said as he exited the room shutting the door behind him.
“What’s going on?” questioned Vernon worriedly. Cousin Harry had visited Vernon while at Smeltings at other times, but never at his parents’ request…
“Could you take a seat first, please,” Cousin Harry asked quietly. Vernon warily took the chair Kenny had just vacated and sat down. Cousin Harry sat down as well. He reached up with his hands and readjusted his glasses before facing Vernon with his green eyes and saying, “It’s about Holly…”

**********
“Dear Grandmum,
I have completed my first day at school. I like my subjects and the Professors are all nice.
Hope you are well.”

Anthony Richards closed his eyes and leaned his head against the kitchen wall. The previous
day had yielded a jumble of information that made no sense. Anthony’s head hurt just thinking about
it.

O’Shea returned to the prefect’s table before lunch. Her eyes glittered venomously at Anthony,
but she was courteous.

The results of the outside search confirmed a wall encircled the castle and grounds; an opaque
barrier that shimmered with colour, obvious up close, but nearly invisible when standing more than a
meter away. The wall stretched as high as they could reach or jump or throw or levitate and was
firmly attached to the solid barrier that lay scarce ten centimeters beneath the ground. It extended a
meter into the lake as well complete with a solid floor beneath the muddy soil. No spell they could
think of would crack, dent or breach the wall.

“There’s nothing alive!” complained prefect Finnegan. She had joined the outside search. “I
mean, yeah, we’re here and there’s plants, but no bugs, no birds and no animals! It’s so silent! There
wasn’t even a breeze!”

The search outside around the grounds revealed a fully stocked Greenhouse 3 filled with baby
mandrake plants ready to be repotted and a Venomous Tentacula in one corner. Greenhouse 1
contained only tables and benches and Greenhouse 2 was a building with locked doors that the
students could find no way to enter. Hagrid’s garden and pumpkin patch with plants in full bloom
were also there but Hagrid’s hut was an illusion. It looked perfect with every detail but up close the
rough looking wood walls were smooth to the touch, instead of a hut, it was an immovable solid
square block attached to the ground. No amount of blasting could break in.

The castle search revealed several differences between the structure they were in and the real
thing. The potions room appeared fully stocked but the door leading to the back room where the
more dangerous and valuable potions were kept would not open. More accurately, there was no
door! It looked like a door from a distance but felt like a smooth solid wall with no doorknob when
examined up close. It was the same for the infirmary door and the doors to the professors’ offices.
The passage to the Headmistress’ office didn’t work. Actually, the students blasted the griffin that
guarded the passage and found nothing, no passage behind. Trelawney’s attic trapdoor would not
open. The library was filled with books but the searchers found an invisible wall blocking off the
restricted items. The school owls were gone; the only birds in the owlery were those brought by
students.

Surprisingly, the students found the door to the Room of Requirement and the charred door
actually opened revealing a smoky room with table and quills; they couldn’t get the room to re-
purpose though. Anthony resolved to visit the Room of Requirement later. There was something
familiar about the description.

On the plus side, no kidnapper had made his presence known during the day, nothing looking
suspiciously dark was found (much to Scorpious’ disappointment) the stairs worked properly and
more pillows and blankets appeared in the Ravenclaw dorm which were promptly added to the
collection in the Great Hall.

There was no new food for lunch or diner. Anthony was glad he had told everyone to ration
their food. Unfortunately, O’Shea and Grufffudd had failed to pass the word on. The Slytherin food
ran out early and dinner had been a dismal collection of left-over leftovers; everyone complained.
O'Shea had glared at Anthony even more.

The familiar “click” of the kitchen doorknob turning sounded. Anthony opened his eyes and readied his wand. There was a reason why he was sitting up against the kitchen wall since 5:00 am. The whole kitchen had been empty then. Food suddenly appeared on the counters sometime after that. Anthony absently wondered what would have happened had he been sitting on the counter at time. Would the food have arrived on top of him? Beneath him? Through him or not at all, an already occupied counter preventing food from arriving altogether? Interesting thoughts, but nothing Anthony intended to pursue. Until they knew more, it didn’t seem like a good idea to mess with whatever spells brought the food.

At 6:05, the door creaked open slowly. A lit wand followed by a hand, arm and body slid through the opening. Then another body, another and another... eight in all. They were Slytherins, of course: Anthony knew them all well. Olivia O'Shea, Martina Goyle and her boyfriend Bernard Bletchley, Shirley Ogg and her boyfriend Derrik Groarke, Marella Avery and her boyfriend Rory Muir, and Glenna MacAra. MacAra closed the door and secured it with a heavy chain; Anthony wondered where they had found the chain.

“Incendo!” said Bletchley. He was a bit of a pyromaniac and liked setting fires. A torch affixed to the wall lit up. “Incendo!” he repeated and another torch lit up. Soon the kitchen was well lit. The eight students pulled out bags from beneath their robes and moved swiftly to the food...

Anthony stood. “Looking for a morning snack?” he questioned. Anthony flicked his wand as he spoke removing the disillusionment charm that had hid his body. It was a simple but effective charm. Paige used it regularly to unnerve clients; they had all used it to protect their dorm when the Slytherins feared reprisals after Paige had supposedly kidnapped Wycliff.

The eight froze in place and looked at Anthony in surprise.

“What are you doing here?” O'Shea managed to say.

“Waiting for you,” Anthony said calmly while holding out his wand ready to use. “Where’s Gruffudd?” he asked conversationally while looking around at the group.

“He wouldn’t come,” answered O’Shea disdainfully.

“He’s smarter than I thought,” commented Anthony aloud.

“No, stupid!” O’Shea declared confidently. “We become the masters once we control the food!” she told him. “There’s no need to worry about being out numbered! Want to join us?” she invited.

“We’re not at Hogwarts,” Anthony reminded O’Shea while not responding to her offer. He’d never turn his back on O’Shea let alone team up with her.

“So?”

“That means the doors won’t hold them; they can Apparate in and out of the kitchen any time they wish.”

“We’ll be ready for them!” she assured Anthony confidently.

“You weren’t for me,” reminded Anthony.

“You’re a Slytherin,” she said dismissively. “How did you know, anyway?”

“You’ve been complaining about the food all day,” answered Anthony. “And secretive all night. The connection was easy to make.” And something he would do under a similar situation. That wasn’t why he knew, though. But the answer would suffice. “You’re setting a poor example for the other Slytherins,” he told her formally. “I’d like your wand.”

“You and what army?” she asked disdainfully.

“This one,” answered Anthony and the whole kitchen seemed to fill with students, all pointing their wands at the eight. The eight backed up instinctively into a tight group with wands drawn and their backs towards each other.

“Firsts?” questioned O’Shea with disbelief. “You challenge us with a bunch of Firsts?”

The Slytherin Firsts had all been thrilled to learn a charm and have a chance to use it practically. Their collective presence was intimidating but they were still only Firsts, barely able to hold a wand correctly. Anthony told them to duck down and start hitting feet and legs should any spells start flying. That would keep them safe yet distract the wand owners causing any spells cast to
“Not exactly,” admitted Anthony. Abruptly more Slytherins appeared from behind the Firsts—Scorpius Malfoy, Rebecca Corwin, Nicholas Adderson, and Manasa Basu. Their wands were all firmly pointed at the bunched Slytherins. Collectively, with the Firsts, they were more than enough to take care of O’Shea and her friends.

“Your wand?” repeated Anthony. He stepped between the firsts and held out his free hand expectantly. “You really want to be embarrassed by losing it in front of a bunch of Firsts?” he argued reasonably.

O’Shea rolled her eyes. “Oh, all right!” she snapped in defeat. “Later!” she promised as she handed over her wand.

“Of course,” agreed Anthony as he pocketed her wand. It had a distinctly unfriendly feel about it. He’d have to watch and make sure O’Shea never had the opportunity for a “next time.” “I’ll be keeping it for a week,” he told her.

“We’ll be out of here before then!” O’Shea promised.

“At which time I’ll happily return your wand,” promised Anthony. He didn’t think that would happen, though. As near as he could tell, they were in one huge bubble with no entry or exit. Several teams of students had spent the whole afternoon and evening digging up the grounds centimeter-by-centimeter trying to find a crack or hole in the base and so far had found nothing.

“It’s also a day without food,” Anthony informed her.

“What!” O’Shea exclaimed indignantly.

“That’s what you planned for the rest of us wasn’t it?” Anthony guessed. “It’s only fair you experience the same…”

“You can’t do that!” she exploded.

“Want me to lock you up in the annex for the day or think you can manage a martyred look and not eat in front of the others?”

“This is insane!” she protested.

“You should know that I’ll confiscate your wands and insist you spend a day without meals if you were here to steal food…” Anthony informed the group.

“To help, of course,” answered Avery brightly. She was very practical. Where shall we begin?” she added looking at O’Shea expectantly.

“Prefect Basu will be in charge of equitably dividing the food, today,” informed Anthony.

“Basu!” exclaimed O’Shea angrily. “You can’t do that!”

“I just did!” answered Anthony coldly. “We can’t have our prefects stealing food from the students. Your actions have endangered everyone!” he told her. “I warned you,” he reminded.

Corwin would have been his first choice but she was a 4th year student. Prefects were traditionally selected from the 5th year students.

Manasa Basu was a student transfer from India. She arrived two years earlier as a third year. She requested and received a private sorting during the summer rather than be “sorted with a bunch of Firsts.” Basu, attired in a green and gold tunic, veil and loose green silk pants, had stepped
proudly like a princess to the Slytherin table and watched the more public Sorting Ceremony of the first night with the rest of the Slytherins. Her preferential treatment during the summer might have made her a subject for harassment but Basu was a Slytherin and Slytherins should be treated better. Though no less enthusiastic in harassing the other students the last year, Basu had rarely been caught and had actually argued against crashing Pilkington’s Ball as an “unnecessary display of power.” Basu was also an “outsider” arriving late as she had and so the other Slytherins often ignored her. But Anthony also knew Basu was quite good at spells and charms. He had traded O’Shea’s prefect position to get Basu to add a temporary Kitchen Room Extension to accommodate all the people he had brought with him.

“Well?” asked Anthony after the food division was well under way. “Want the annex or not?” making reference to O’Shea’s day without food.

“Not!” O’Shea said with disgust.

“O.K.,” agreed Anthony without emotion. “Corwin and Adderson will stay with you to make sure.” He glanced over in their direction and the two nodded in agreement. They should. Anthony had paid them a galleon each for the day plus a 50% off shopping spree at Tom’s store once they got out of here. Anthony doubted O’Shea could top that.

“You don’t trust me!” O’Shea asked in a hurt voice.

“Not particularly,” admitted Anthony. “The day’s pretty much over at 9pm,” he added. “You can eat then.” That’s when Corwin and Adderson went off the clock. This way Anthony wouldn’t have to renegotiate a price with them for the night.

“ Gee thanks,” O’Shea said sarcastically.

They waited until Basu had expertly ushered the rest of the students up the stairs with the food and then followed. Anthony had promised Gruffudd’s prefect position to Scorpius for his assistance but Gruffudd hadn’t joined the group. Anthony would have to think of something else sufficiently prestigious for Scorpius… It shouldn’t be too hard. With Anthony’s success at overcoming the “coup,” his position was assured with the Slytherins and he would remain in power if he didn’t offend the other houses too much…

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Jeremy Corner stood in the shadows and silently watched the Slytherins move up the stairs with the food. When they had passed out of hearing, he nodded to the two other 7th year students he had brought with him. They nodded back and the three Apparated to the Great Hall. Their presence wasn’t needed in the kitchen.

“Onella Jha (recently sorted into Ravenclaw) had heard the Slytherin upperclassmen (upperclasswomen, actually) talking in the bathroom and recognized the importance of their words. She had told Jeremy immediately. Interestingly, Jha had also told Taj Mallik (recently sorted into Slytherin.) Mallik had alerted Richards. It was rare for students to cross communicate between houses and unheard of at such an early age. Was it possible that Richards had managed to create a fifth house? That of the Firsts?

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“We need to teach the Firsts how to use their wands,” stated Anthony at the morning prefect meeting. The rest of the students had been pleasantly surprised to see the Slytherins bring in all the food for the day. Anthony loudly made a big deal about how the Slytherins were chipping in and doing their part as explanation. Not to be outdone, the Hufflepuffs offered to bring up all the food the next day… “They’re (the Firsts) the most vulnerable once the kidnapper arrives,” Anthony added as explanation. “They can’t even help out in a fight.”

“As it is now, they can’t help out in anything that requires magic,” added prefect Basu. Of course, they’d managed that disillusionment charm just fine but that was Slytherin business. Basu’s arrival at the prefect table had been received without comment. Anthony wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing.

“We usually assign some of the older students to tutor the Firsts,” put in Huckaby. “Perhaps we could put together some sort of class for them all…”

“They don’t have any books,” reminded O’Daniels practically.

“There should be some in the library,” informed Moore. “At least one copy of each book per class. We can always use them to make more copies…”

“An excellent idea,” stated Anthony. “Why don’t you and Huckaby organize class for them?”

“What subject?” asked Moore.

Anthony thought a moment. “Focus on basic defense work for now,” he told her. “If I recall, the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom is open so they could meet there…” She nodded. “The grass is back,” she added abruptly.

“Huh? What?”

“The grass is back,” she repeated. “We dug holes all day yesterday,” she reminded Anthony. “Donovan was outside this morning and reported the grass is back. The dirt is still mounded in piles where we left it, but the holes have been filled up and there’s grass on top.”

“Uh,” Anthony struggled to think what that meant.

“There must be a renewing spell on the grounds as well,” stated Corner thoughtfully. “I wonder what else has renewed…”

“A good question,” followed up Anthony appreciatively. “Perhaps the Slytherins and Gryffindors could get together and do a castle and grounds search again.”

“To what end?” questioned Gruffydd. “If it’ll be the same, why bother?”

“We could move stuff around, add stuff, remove stuff, damage things and return to see what happens tomorrow,” suggested Moore thoughtfully.

“We’ll take the outside; you take the inside,” volunteered O’Daniels.

Anthony frowned. “No, it’s better if the teams are made up of more than one house,” he told O’Daniels. Anthony knew no one would believe anything the Slytherins reported if not confirmed by a member of one of the other houses and he certainly didn’t want the Gryffindors out and about without a Slytherin to report on their activities. “How about if Basu and Finnegan lead the castle team and you and O’Daniels search the outside,” he suggested while looking at Gruffydd. Gruffydd nodded reluctantly. He no doubt knew if he refused Anthony would instantly replace him as he had replaced O’Shea. Basu nodded her agreement as well; she was eager to prove her worthiness as prefect.

“And the other students?” questioned Woods. She wasn’t a prefect, but as Head Girl, Anthony had been sure to include her at the meetings as well. “It gets to be too many to handle if they’re all on the search teams,” Woods added. Anthony looked out around the Hall. There were a lot of students. How many would be left after the groups formed up? “Uh, clean?” suggested Anthony. “Straighten up? Make the place look better?” They definitely needed classes or something! Students wandering loose could get into all sorts of trouble… “Perhaps you could put the remaining students to work taking care of the Hall…” he suggested to Woods. Anthony knew she wouldn’t want to stray far
from Wycliff anyway. She nodded. “Are there any brooms?” he asked suddenly. “Check and see if there’s any brooms! If not, we need to make some,” he ordered. Perhaps they could organize a Quidditch match… anything to keep the students busy. “Is there anything else?” he asked looking around the group. No one spoke. “Then I guess that’s it for now. See you at lunch.”

Anthony rose, happy to stretch his legs. He moved off the stage and found Scorpius. “Come with me,” he directed and headed out the Hall.

“Where are we going?” asked Scorpius.

“You’ll see,” answered Anthony evasively. He stepped through the open doors and into the entryway. Scorpius stared curiously at the two outside standing by the stairs. “Ready?” Anthony asked Pilkington and Fitzpatrick.

“What about him?” asked Fitzpatrick bluntly.

“He’s coming too,” stated Anthony firmly.

“Why?”

“Malfoy’s my Advisor too,” answered Anthony.

“Advisor?” questioned Scorpius.

“Yes,” confirmed Anthony. “A bit of perspective from across the board—people I can trust who won’t lie or try to curry favour… That’s you, isn’t it?” he asked Scorpius.

Scorpius puffed up a bit. “Certainly,” he assured Anthony with pride.

Anthony nodded. “Then come along.” Anthony started up the stairs. The other three followed.

“What makes you think Malfoy’s honest?” questioned Fitzpatrick aggressively.

“Or won’t stab you in the back?” added Pilkington.

Anthony stopped and looked at Scorpius. They were valid questions. He knew he could count on Scorpius, but it was up to Scorpius to convince the others.

“That’s easy,” answered Scorpius. “Without Richards, I wouldn’t be an Advisor.”

“But can you be honest?” persisted Fitzpatrick. “Who brought Pettigrew’s hand to school?” he asked.

“That has nothing to do with this year,” interjected Anthony. The truth to that would ruin all his chances at leadership. “Try again.”

“Where were you this morning?” asked Pilkington.

“Huh?”

“You and a bunch of Firsts sneaking out before dawn. What were you up to?”

“Slytherin business,” Scorpius answered promptly.

“No, it’s everyone’s business if it affects us,” persisted Fitzpatrick.

“We thought we’d do something nice for the group,” Scorpius answered vaguely.

“That’s doubtful,” retorted Pilkington. “Like O’Shea cares about anyone, and now she’s not prefect?”

“O’Shea tried to take over the kitchen and we stopped her,” answered Anthony. It was clear they already guessed what had happened and it wasn’t fair to put Scorpius on the spot like that.

“So this advisory position is payment?” questioned Fitzpatrick bluntly.

“Yes,” admitted Anthony. “But that doesn’t mean he’s not capable or that I don’t trust him.”

“We don’t!” stated Fitzpatrick bluntly.

“Not my problem,” answered Anthony. “Malfoy stays; get over it.” He turned off the landing and started resolutely down the corridor.

“Friendship is not a qualification for Advisor,” persisted Pilkington as she followed. “It’s not a good decision…”

Anthony stopped. “You’re the ones who keeps harping that a Dark Wizard kidnapper will come for us when we least expect it. Who’s to say he won’t leave a few little presents for us first? Scorpius is the only person I know who has any real experience with Dark Magic items. Friend or not, I think that’s a pretty important qualification; don’t you?” Without waiting for a response, Anthony turned and resumed walking down the corridor.

“Where are we headed, anyway?” questioned Malfoy keeping step with Anthony.

“The Room of Requirement,” answered Anthony happy at the change in subject. Scorpius’
body seemed to tense.

“Why?” asked Fitzpatrick.

“I heard it was open,” Anthony answered vaguely.

“Oh? Is there anything interesting inside?” questioned Scorpius in a casual sounding voice. It wasn’t a casual question.

The possible contents of the room was one more reason why Anthony had included Scorpius on this trip. The last time they had been in the Room of Requirement, they had filled it with the Slytherin supply of stink bombs, nifflers, bugs, snails, snakes, flobberworms, ink, goo, glue, dye and other contraband items they had used to harass the other students. It had been Anthony’s suggestion to put them there; the Slytherin students expected an immediate search of the dorms by McGonagall after the Memorial Ceremony and feared further reprisal from McGonagall should she find something…

“Nothing of importance,” answered Pilkington. “I heard they couldn’t re-purpose it either.”

“Pity,” thought Anthony regretfully. Scorpius’ survey list of contraband items smuggled in by the Slytherins was woefully small. It was no doubt inaccurate but gave Anthony an idea of what else was out there; not much. The room they had left behind last year contained all sorts of things that would be useful against a kidnapper. If they could get into that room, then Anthony would need Scorpius’ knowledge to safely handle everything.

“Why bother visiting the room if you can’t re-purpose it?” questioned Scorpius.

“There’s something I want to see,” Anthony explained vaguely.

“Actually, it’s a good idea to revisit the room,” put in Pilkington thoughtfully. “We’ve been wondering if the room and its contents provide clues to the identity of our kidnapper.”

“We?” questioned Scorpius echoing Anthony’s own question about the word.

“The Ravenclaws,” she answered simply.

“How?” asked Fitzpatrick.

“Well, whomever did this is someone who has been to Hogwarts, most likely a witch or wizard!”

“Duh!”

“…knows the professors and knows about the Sorting Ceremony.”

“So?” That was all pretty obvious. Anyone who knew Hogwarts knew that sort of stuff.

“But there are things different from the real Hogwarts.”

“So?”

“Those differences must mean something. Are they intentional or accidental?”

“Intentional of course! Why else would the gate be locked!” stated Scorpius.

“True,” agreed Pilkington, “but what about the other differences? Why bother with them? Why only one dorm? Are we all meant to use just one dorm? Or is someone playing head games and trying to divide us?”

“And why force us all in the girls bathroom!” added Fitzpatrick with annoyance.

“O.K. so we have a witch who likes Ravenclaws and hates guys,” concluded Anthony aloud. Interesting. He’d been so busy trying to maintain control that he had never once given a thought to who had done this to them.

“Perhaps,” agreed Pilkington. “Or perhaps it is all misdirection. It could be a wizard who wants to keep all the other wizards uncomfortable and thus at a disadvantage and the Ravenclaw dorms could be a lure to get us to separate ourselves from the rest of the students for some unknown purpose...”

Anthony mentally shook his head. It was all too deep for him. He preferred simple answers and easy spells. “Well, keep me posted,” he said aloud as if learning the identity of the kidnapper had been on his list of things to do all long.

“How does all this relate to the Room of Requirement?” Fitzpatrick asked.

“Most people don’t even know about the room,” answered Pilkington. “That it appears in this copy of Hogwarts and actually opens, must mean something…”

“Like what?” questioned Scorpius.
“We don’t know that yet,” answered Pilkington. “It’s apparently set up as a meeting room of some sort,” she continued. “No one who’s seen it so far recognizes it so it could be something new— maybe something original thought up by the kidnapper himself! Does the kidnapper want us to meet there? Who? Why?”

Anthony slowed to a stop when he reached the Tutu tapestry. Yes, there was the door, charred and sooty, just as the other students had described; just as he remembered it. He reached out, took hold of the smoky knob and turned the handle. It opened easily. Anthony stepped inside. The others followed.

“This is rather boring,” stated Scorpius disdainfully as he looked around. The room was bare except for a single long gray table tinged in charcoal black, with eight matching chairs and smelled faintly of smoke. A smoky gray quill and a bottle of ink lay on the table in front of each chair. In one corner was a small basket and blanket. Anthony nodded in agreement though the room awakened all sorts of memories within. “Could be for prefects,” reasoned Scorpius. “Eight chairs, two per house…”

“That’s weird,” muttered Fitzpatrick bluntly as he walked around the table.

“What is?” questioned Pilkington.

“Can’t be,” Fitzpatrick continued with disbelief while not answering Pilkington. He stopped in front of the charred basket and powder gray blanket within and stared. “It’s the same one!” he stated and looked to Anthony for confirmation.

“What is?” demanded Scorpius.

“Um, I don’t think this room has anything to do with the kidnappers,” Anthony began cautiously. “I’ve seen it before…” he admitted.

“You have?” questioned Pilkington with interest. “When?”

“Two years ago…”

“Why?”

“Uh, we were writing invitations…”

“You and Fitzpatrick?” scoffed Scorpius. “Seriously?”

“I was bored!” stated Anthony defensively.

“More important, who else was there?” asked Pilkington.

“Huh? Why?”

“The distinctive appearance suggests someone who saw this room either recreated it or passed that information to someone else who recreated it,” concluded Pilkington. “So who was in the room?”

“Uh, me and Fitzpatrick,” began Anthony reluctantly.

“And Albus, and the Prendergs…” continued Fitzpatrick…

Anthony could see again the twins with brown hair and freckles and similar clothing. They hadn’t looked anything like that last year. “…and Turay…” Anthony added remembering the spindly girl with dark skin, black frizzy hair and huge glasses. She had been such a pain last year.

“That’s only seven,” observed Pilkington.

“And Holly, of course,” finished Fitzpatrick.

“Wycliff!” exclaimed Scorpius. “Why am I not surprised… Actually, I am. What on earth were you doing with Wycliff and Fitzpatrick!” he asked Anthony.

“Learning how to get into the Room of Requirement!” snapped Anthony. “Something I would never have learned from you!” he reminded. Of course, that was not why he had been in the room at the time, but it was an excuse Scorpius would understand… Anthony well remembered the sense of isolation he had felt that year when, after taking his first sip of Sabois, he had told the others he thought it was a mildly bitter and rather uninteresting drink. The other Slytherins, Scorpius included, had pointedly ignored him after that. When Potter announced he was looking for “help,” Anthony had welcomed the chance to “belong” with any group, if only for an hour…

“That doesn’t matter now,” interrupted Pilkington. “Did you tell anyone about the room?” she questioned Anthony.

“Huh? No.”
“Did you?” she asked Fitzpatrick.
“No!” he stated firmly.
“Well, we’ll have to check with the Prendergs and Potter. The kidnapper found out about the room somehow…”
“Rather convenient we can’t ask Wycliff,” stated Scorpius acidly.
“Don’t try to blame this all on Holly!” replied Fitzpatrick protectively. “Just because she “purposed” the room doesn’t mean anything!”
“She’s the one who purposed the room?”
“What about Turay?” questioned Anthony quickly before Fitzpatrick and Scorpius started arguing over Wycliff. “We’ve got to ask her too.”
“Turay isn’t here.”
Everyone looked at Pilkington in surprise.
“She’s missing?” asked Anthony worriedly. It suddenly occurred to him they should have been doing a head count of the students. Had the kidnapper been taking students one by one and he hadn’t noticed?
“No. She wasn’t on the train,” clarified Pilkington. “We thought your threats might have deterred her from returning to Hogwarts or, if not her, her family.”
Anthony felt his face warm with the accusation. The Slytherins, Anthony included, had made all sorts of threats against Nadia Turay last year. She was the person who first brought modified wands to McGonagall’s attention. They’d meant the threats at the time but Anthony knew none of them would have been carried out this year—the influence of Pettigrew’s hand was long gone.
“Well, that makes her the kidnapper then,” concluded Scorpius firmly. “She didn’t show up to school because she knew what was going to happen! I admit I never thought she could pull off something like this! Though, in retrospect, a preemptive strike has a better chance of success than retaliation…”
“Turay did not do this either!” insisted Fitzpatrick. “She hasn’t a mean bone in her body!”
“Mean” is a matter of viewpoint,” replied Anthony coolly. “I happen to think destroying my wand last year was mean but you did it anyway.”
“And I think we should not rush to point fingers until we have made a thorough investigation!” interjected Pilkington. “A premature accusation blinds us from information that could point in other directions…”
“Like what?” questioned Scorpius.
“Like we still haven’t asked Potter and the Prendergs about the room,” Pilkington began.
“They told no one, I’d bet on it!” assured Anthony.
“And you’d be betting with all our lives not just your own!” retorted Pilkington. “Those are odds I would not take. What about the fact Turay was a 3rd year student?” Pilkington reminded him.
“How do you expect a Third year student to create all of this?” Pilkington waved her hand around the room.
“So she had help!”
“From whom? And was it help or did Turay’s memories “help” someone else? I know I’m only supposed to “advise,” continued Pilkington, “but I must insist that all our conversation about the kidnapper and/or possible plans to escape be kept between us and all further discussions between you and the prefects be done under a muffliato spell!”
“Are you telling me to keep this information to ourselves?” questioned Anthony, not that he had planned to tell anyone else.
“We can’t properly investigate if the information we obtain is coloured with preconceptions,” answered Pilkington.
“That sounds like we have something to hide,” observed Fitzpatrick.
“We do,” agreed Pilkington. “Or I hope we do. This place has eyes and ears built into it for the benefit of the kidnappers! It must! We just haven’t found them yet. But why else go to all this trouble if you can’t watch what happens? The kidnapper is out there right now, watching, waiting for the right time to move to continue his purpose! And if he has some way to get in and out of here we
have not yet found, then the kidnapper may be already among us disguised in some way we least expect!” she added. “I would not give the kidnapper any more information than what he can already observe, would not give him the satisfaction of learning what we know or think we know about him!”

Anthony stared at Pilkington a full minute before responding. “All right,” he said slowly. “We’ll keep your confidences, but you have to keep us posted at all times!”

“You? Or you and Malfoy!” questioned Fitzpatrick suspiciously.

Anthony looked over at Scorpius. This wouldn’t work unless Scorpius agreed too. “A moment,” he told Fitzpatrick. Anthony nodded at Scorpius and the two stepped into a corner.

“What are you up to?” whispered Scorpius.


Scorpius nodded.

Anthony turned to Pilkington and Fitzpatrick. “Both of us,” he assured them. “But if I find out you’re keeping anything from us then all bets are off!”

“Agreed.”

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Chapter 11

“The Defense class went really well this morning,” reported Head Girl Woods. “They want some more lessons this afternoon,” she continued. “I was thinking another subject, like Potions or Charms,” she added thoughtfully. “You can’t stand around saying “expelliarmus” all day…”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” answered Anthony when he realized Woods was seeking his approval for the class.

“Which?” she asked expectantly.

“Uh, what do the rest of you think?” he asked throwing the question out to the group.

“Charms!” answered Finnegan promptly. “There’s some good defensive spells in the book.”

“And some excellent poisons in Potions!” countered Basu.

“Assuming you can get the kidnapper to drink them!” retorted O’Daniels.

The mood of the group had changed considerably once Anthony proposed the prefect meetings be held under a *muffliato* spell. It seemed that it had occurred to everyone that the “hall had ears,” to everyone but Anthony…

Much to Anthony’s relief, Corner offered to cast the spell. Anthony wasn’t sure he could cast a *Muffliato* spell for a group so large. Once the spell was cast, discussion turned swiftly from meals and simple organization to open plans of defense and attack.

“Um did you have anyone in mind to lead the class?” asked Anthony.

“Weasley.” No doubt meaning Rose Weasley. Anthony knew she had scored high marks in all her classes though Anthony had heard Ivy complain that Rose’s brother Hugh also did annoyingly well in his classes.

“Myself!” offered Basu proudly.

“Let’s go with Charms first,” decided Anthony aloud. Weasley was part of the Potter clan. Securing her assistance would gain open Potter support of his leadership. “Why don’t your tutors meet with Weasley to put it together,” he added to Woods. She nodded. There was a frown of disappointment on Basu’s face. Anthony knew Basu was more than capable of mixing a potion or two but he knew she was good at something else too… “You’re great at Potions, Basu,” Anthony acknowledged aloud, “but there’s something else I’d like you to work on.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a carefully folded handkerchief and placed it in front of Basu.

“What’s this?” she asked curiously as she unfolded the handkerchief. Within the folds were 7 small brown oval objects with a point on one end.

“Apple seeds,” Anthony announced. Anthony had returned to the garbage receptacle and retrieved the apple core he had tossed there the previous day. Then he had carefully removed the seeds from the core. “Will they grow?”

“Huh? They should. Why not?” questioned Basu.

“I don’t know,” answered Anthony with frustration. “But if this place isn’t Hogwarts, then maybe the seeds aren’t right either, or the dirt or something! Can you get them to grow?” he asked again and then explained further. “Right now our *only* food supply is whatever the kidnapper leaves for us in the kitchen. What if that stops?” or *is seized*… “Can you get them to grow? And if they’ll grow, can you make them grow fast and start producing?” Anthony knew Basu had helped create the jungle outside Hogwarts last fall with Forever Grow fertilizer. If anyone could get them to grow it would be her. Basu nodded her head, her eyes shined at importance of the task. “In the meantime, tell everyone to collect seeds during lunch,” Anthony instructed the rest of the prefects.

“What kind?” questioned prefect Wrezenski.

“Apple, lemon, tomato… whatever looks like a seed,” answered Basu.

“If we can grow it, we should,” put in Moore. “Having an alternate food source could be crucial.”

“And on that note, let’s get some food and find some seeds,” finished Anthony. He stood ending the *Muffliato* spell with a loud pop in his ear. “We’ll meet again this evening…” Everyone
else stood and the meeting broke up.

“How’s Wycliff?” Anthony asked Huckaby. She shook her head sorrowfully and walked away not even answering.

Both Basu and Gruffudd frowned. They didn’t say anything, but Anthony could almost hear unspoken comments and see their eyes rolling up in their heads in disapproval. He understood. Even here Wycliff managed to receive preferential treatment! She didn’t contribute, didn’t participate, didn’t even move as far as he could tell. If she ate at all, she was hand fed, no doubt the choices bits! Her name was sacrosanct and everyone hovered worriedly over her as if she were queen! Totally unacceptable! Unfortunately, Wycliff was also someone the other students seemed to value...

Anthony grabbed an orange, dug his nails into the rind and began to peel it. He watched the crowd behind the Hufflepuff table and frowned while he worked. It wasn’t his doing; everyone knew that. But if Wycliff died or something Anthony was certain he’d get the blame; it would be on his watch. Something would have to be done about her. But what could he do that hadn’t already been tried?

Once the peel was off, Anthony split the orange into sections and began to eat savouring the juicy sweetness while carefully spitting the pits into a small spoon. He focused his thoughts about Wycliff while he ate.

Anthony cast his mind back to what he remembered about Wycliff their first years in school. It wasn’t good. Wycliff had embarrassed and gotten him into trouble frequently. Then Wycliff had unexpectedly braved Slytherin anger once to say something to Tom that reunited him with Paige. Tom had been a mess that year and Anthony had been glad of her efforts. When Wycliff had “died,” Anthony had joined the rest of the community in their sorrow... Then Anthony remembered the Room of Requirement and writing out the invitations. He remembered his immense relief when he discovered none of the group liked Sabois! He had actually set up a meeting between Wycliff and Paige about Sabois. Anthony hadn’t hated Wycliff that year and her “preferential” treatment no longer mattered. But the next year, when Anthony realized Wycliff had again arrived late without explanation, Anthony joined the others condemning her preferential treatment... Were his feelings towards Wycliff then solely the result of Pettigrew’s hand? Anthony finished the orange, wiped off his fingers and emptied the spoon of seeds into a bowl placed in the middle of the table for seed collection.

He stood and walked to the Hufflepuff table. The other students looked up as he approached.

“What are you doing here?” questioned Woods.

“I’m here to talk with Wycliff,” Anthony told her.

“She’s busy,” stated Owens. “Go away.”

Anthony ignored Owens and walked past the table to the knot of Hufflepuffs that he knew surrounded Wycliff. The students, all 6th years, stood forming a protective wall between him and Wycliff. Anthony knew them all, prefect Donald Wrezenski, Stretch (Susan) Breysburry, (with a tarantula on her shoulder) Hugh Douglass, Becky Smith and Mickey O’Toole.

Smith stepped forward as he neared. The others closed up reforming the wall behind her. “Go away,” Smith told Anthony.

“I want to speak with Wycliff,” he told her.

“She doesn’t want to talk with you,” Smith insisted using her body to block his way.

“Let her tell me that herself,” insisted Anthony. He walked around Smith and faced the wall of students. “This nonsense has gone on long enough,” he told the group. “Let me pass!” he ordered. They didn’t move. Anthony drew in a deep breath. “I am the Headmistress’ Personal Assistant!” he told the group. “I am here to check on Wycliff’s condition. Now, step aside!”

The Hufflepuffs looked at each other. Anthony stepped even closer until he was nose-to-nose with Wrezenski. He looked directly in Wrezenski’s eyes. “Move!” he ordered firmly.

Wrezenski looked at the others on either side. “Come on,” he muttered. “Can’t hurt.” The
Hufflepuffs stepped aside revealing the pale, still form of Holly Wycliff.

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“Give us some space,” Anthony ordered as he walked up to Wycliff. The Hufflepuffs moved back but remained within reach and hearing.

Wycliff lay on the floor near the wall. Anthony sat down next to Wycliff making himself as comfortable as possible. A blue blanket had been placed over her body and Anthony could only see Wycliff’s head above it. Someone had taken another blue blanket, folded it several times and placed it under Wycliff’s head as a pillow. Her eyes were closed; her long blonde hair, and single beaded braid had been pulled out from the under covers and lay on top. More blankets were beneath her body shielding her from the cold of the stones.

Wycliff looked asleep but Anthony couldn’t tell for sure; she was so still he couldn’t even see her breathing... He reached out to touch her cheek, to smooth away a stray strand of hair, heard a hiss and felt a sudden sharp stabbing pain on the back of his hand! “Hey!” Anthony exclaimed involuntarily while pulling his hand back in surprise. He looked in disbelief at the thin stripe on the back of his hand that welled up with blood. “What the?” What had happened? It looked like a scratch! But how? Anthony stared again at Wycliff, at the blanket covering her. This time he saw an indentation within the folds, a blurred flicker that indicated the presence of something not quite visible... The cat!?? She made her cat invisible?? That answered one question!

“Right!” thought Anthony to himself. “No touching. And an audience,” he added eyeing the crowd of grim Hufflepuffs that surrounded them. “Not the best way to conduct a conversation but can’t be helped.” “Wake up, Wycliff!” Anthony said loudly. “I want to talk to you!” Wycliff didn’t move. Anthony drew his wand. All the Hufflepuffs seemed to surge forward with his action.

Anthony ignored them and instead kept his eye on the indentation that hid a cat. “Wake up!” he said again using the wand to poke Wycliff in the shoulder. He could hear the murmur of disapproval from the Hufflepuffs. It was bad form to use his wand that way; Anthony wanted to grab Wycliff and shake her into consciousness, but he didn’t dare touch her, not with the cat on guard... Anthony used his wand and tried again giving Wycliff a harder poke. She remained unresponsive. Anthony poked her some more—“Wake up, Wycliff! Wake up! Quit pretending!” he ordered as he poked. She had to be awake and ignoring him! He’d just have to force her to hear even if she didn’t want to...

“What do you think you’re doing?” hissed Fitzpatrick angrily while pulling Anthony up by the arm. Looking around, Anthony saw that Fitzpatrick, the Potters, the Weasleys, some Gryffindors and Ravenclaws had joined the Hufflepuffs. They all stood in a semi-circle around him and Wycliff.

“Talking to Wycliff!” Anthony answered as he shook himself free. Anthony stood. Fitzpatrick was still taller than him, but it was not such a height difference as standing versus sitting. “You’ve all been pandering to Wycliff telling her how great she is when the truth is Wycliff’s a major pain and inconvenience!” he told Fitzpatrick in a voice loud enough to be heard by Wycliff too. “We should all be working to get out of here and most of you are spending your time moping about Wycliff. Of all the selfish self-centered things for her to do!” he finished righteously. In a lower voice Anthony added, “This has gone on long enough!” he told Fitzpatrick. “You’ve all had your chance. Now it’s my turn!” Fitzpatrick backed away slowly. Anthony sat down again. He drew a deep breath. Where to begin...

“If you die I’m not going to your funeral a-gain!” Anthony announced loudly. He could hear the murmur of disapproval from the watchers. He knew his words were callous and unfeeling, but they were also the truth. Paige had warned against dishonesty. “Seriously!” Anthony continued. “Don’t you think one funeral is enough? Everyone else only gets one funeral why should you have two? It’s not my fault you’re still alive! Furthermore,” he threatened Wycliff. “If you die, I shall personally see that your body is burned, your ashes scattered and left behind when we leave—and we will leave,” he assured Wycliff. “But not you! You’re too lazy and shiftless to do anything but lie here like a rock! You don’t deserve to leave!” he informed Wycliff. “You and your selfish self-centered ways are dragging us down!” Anthony accused. “Worse, you’re screwing up my life a-
gain!” Anthony complained. Paige had said Wycliff would know the truth behind his words and it felt good to tell her the truth!

“My one chance to shine as a leader and when we get out of here, they won’t be talking about me, but poor little pathetic you, the one who died! Never mind it was a senseless death that didn’t need to happen, never mind you did it to yourself! They’ll put a positive spin to your death and make it sound noble!” Anthony paused for a breath. “You make me sick!” Anthony continued with disgust. “Everyone thinks you’re so wonderful! Wycliff this! And Wycliff that! You get all the interviews! All the newspaper articles! They party in the streets for you! You got invited to Pilkington’s Ball! You skip school and no one cares! You’ve even got a house elf! I don’t know how you managed that as you’re Mudblood but you did! I bet they’ll build a monument in your memory when you’re gone! Set flowers at it every year and force the students to visit! But I’ll make sure there’s no body to go with it. I won’t let them hold yet another funeral just for you! You don’t deserve it; you don’t deserve any of it. I’m gonna make sure your life doesn’t have that picture perfect ending with a body in the grave! And when I get home I’m g—”

“Will you shut it!”

Anthony’s heart skipped a beat! That was Wycliff’s voice! It was soft but clear. Anthony doubted anyone beyond him had even heard it. A quick glance down: eyes were still closed and she hadn’t moved any, but Anthony was certain he’d heard her! “…and when I get home,” he continued as if she hadn’t spoken, “I’m gonna tell everyone how you freaked out at the first sign of problems…” Anthony wasn’t like the others, wasn’t going to leap in excitement at her every word. “…can’t even have a proper meal without everyone hovering around you on the floor,” he continued. “And then we all had to hike out to the gate, in the dark, all because you were upset! Even now, there’s things to be done but nobody’s doing them because they’re all watching yo…”

“Leave me alone!”

“No way!” responded Anthony promptly while feeling a surge of satisfaction. Wycliff’s voice sounded louder and stronger... “What have you done to deserve it? A little guesswork that passes as Sorting? I wasn’t impressed! None of us were!” (meaning the Slytherins; Anthony hadn’t heard what the other houses thought but no one was requesting re-sorting.) “But at least it got the sniveling Firsts off the floor,” he acknowledged. “Besides, I’ve got things to say to you,” he told her relentlessly, “and I’d rather say them to you while you can hear! Much more satisfying than speaking to some dumb monument! Given the way everyone thinks you’re on death’s doorstep, I figure I’d better talk sooner than not. You know like now, … before you die … a-gain!” Anthony paused to see what Wycliff would say to that. Nothing. So he continued his rant starting a new subject.

“Do you realize how much trouble you’ve caused by lying here like a sack of potatoes?” he complained. “Most of the students here positively worship the ground you walk on—even when you’re not walking! Can’t imagine why but they won’t hear a word against you even if it’s the truth! I’ve had to make all sorts of threats to keep my friends from speaking their mind. They think this is all an act of yours, yet another bid to get attention! Personally, I’m inclined to agree,” Anthony told her. “That first night, sure, you were upset, but you’ve had plenty of time to get over it,” he continued. “What’s the matter? Didn’t like it that a Slytherin was taking the spotlight from you?”

“Let me die in peace!”

“Die?” questioned Anthony. “You’re trying to die? Seriously? Not like this!” he argued. “Now I know this is all an act! Starvation is like one of the slowest ways to go,” he told her. “There’s lots of time for people to fawn over you, wait on you hand and foot, beg and plead for you to eat, get all sobby and teary over you... Lots of nice warm fuzzy emotions for an Empath to bask in... And you can easily “change” your mind... Seriously, if you really wanted to die there are much easier, faster and more effective ways to do it.”

“Like what?”

That question caused Anthony to pause and think a bit. “Well, a knife, I guess,” he began thoughtfully… “Or the swords!” he added realizing the table knives in the Hall probably weren’t very effective... Maybe the suits of armor carried daggers too...

“What else?”
“Poison,” he added remembering Basu’s earlier words…
“What poison?”
“Uh…” There weren’t any poisons, not yet… “You could throw yourself off from the top of the roof!” he suggested. “Or out a window…”
“…and get floated down?”
“Well, I suppose you’d need some help to keep everyone away…”
“Would you?”
“Huh?”
“Would you help?”
“Me? I suppose so…” Anthony answered lightly without much thought. Last year he would have happily thrown everyone off the roof.
Wycliff suddenly lifted her head and shoulders off the floor and balanced on an elbow. “Is that a promise?” she asked looking directly at Anthony.
“Huh?”
“Is that a promise?” she asked again. Her green eyes seemed to bore into Anthony with feverish excitement.
“Uh,” Anthony struggled to remember what he had said…
Wycliff suddenly drew a wand out from beneath the folds of the blanket. She sat up letting the blue blanket slide to the floor and leaned her back against the wall. “Muffliato!” Wycliff said casting a silencing spell over herself and Anthony. “Mustn’t let them hear,” she whispered with a wild gleam in her eyes. “They’d stop you if they could… Well, will you?”
“Will I what?”
“Will you promise to help me kill myself?”
Anthony looked at Wycliff, really looked at her. She still wore her robes of the first night. The blue blanket was crumpled around her ankles. Her knees were drawn tightly up to her chest. Her hair was askew; the slender beaded braid on the right swung gently back and forth. The butterfly clip on the left side was gone and long strands of hair fell over her eyes. The wand was tightly clutched in her hand and she stared intently at Anthony with those green eyes that glowed brightly against her otherwise pale face. How to answer? Anthony knew Paige would kill him, literally, if he did anything even remotely dark, but on the other hand, was it dark if the person actually wanted it done? “Uh… Why do you want to die?” Anthony asked stalling.
“I must!” she insisted. “I’ve got to die before he comes!”
“Before who comes?”
“The kidnapper!”
“Why?”
“I won’t be a tool!” she told him emphatically. “Not for him, not for anyone! I’ve got to die now before he gets here!”
“What? You think all this is because of you?”
“I know it!”
“Well I don’t!” Anthony argued. “Why trap the rest of us if he only wants you?”
“Hostages!” she whispered and her green eyes seemed to grow wider as she spoke.
“Hostages?”
“Yes.”
“I don’t understand.”
“Torture!” she answered fearfully and her wide eyes seemed to get even wider. “He tortures you and I’ll fold! I’ll do whatever he says! I won’t be a dark wizard tool, I just won’t!”
“But, you can block, can’t you?” reminded Anthony still trying to understand.
“That doesn’t matter,” she told him. “With so many students here he can afford to lose a few to make his point. Besides, I won’t be able to stand by and watch him torture and kill my friends one by one! I couldn’t do it when they were strangers, it’s worse when I know them” she told Anthony. “He’ll make threats against you, all of you, torture you over and over again until I cooperate; I’ll never be able to resist, never get free! I’ve got to die now before he starts!”
“Let me get this straight. You think the Hogwarts students were all kidnapped just to use as hostages for your behavior?”

Wycliff nodded.

“You really do think the world revolves around you!” Anthony scoffed. “It makes more sense to think this is all about ransom! Our parents would pay a lot to have us back (he hoped; they weren’t too happy with him when he got off the train last year.) Or maybe we’re being held hostage for the behavior of our parents; that’s what the Dark Lord supposedly did,” he reminded Wycliff. “And it explains why we haven’t seen any kidnapper,” he concluded. “It isn’t about us as much as our parents!”

Wycliff shook her head. “It’s about me,” she stated firmly. “I wish it wasn’t but it is. So will you help?”

“Why me?”

“You offered,” Wycliff answered simply. “And I know you’ll keep your word.”

“You do?”

“Course. You’re Slytherin. Slytherins keep their word.”

“We do?” questioned Anthony in surprise. “Yeah, I guess we do,” he answered thoughtfully.

“Do the others know about this?” he asked abruptly.

“About what?”

“Kill myself? Of course! Why do you think they won’t leave me alone? Took my wands away too,” she told him, “but they didn’t know about this one…” she lifted the wand tightly clutched in her hand and smiled with grim satisfaction.

“Wands? “Uh, how many wands do you have?” Anthony asked realizing suddenly that the spell she cast didn’t have the usual stinky eucalyptus smell.

“Three! You can never have too many.”

“You’re nuttier than Potter!”

“That wouldn’t be hard to do,” replied Wycliff solemnly. “Albus isn’t crazy! He never was! Me? I’m paranoid! So, will you promise?” she persisted.

“No.”

“But y—”

“I think you’re wrong,” Anthony continued. “I don’t think the world revolves around you or that this is all about you. So I won’t help you kill yourself just to satisfy your over-inflated ego. But I’ll tell you what. If it turns out that this is all about you, then I will.”

“It’ll be too late then!” she told him. “The kidnapper will stop you!”

“He’ll try,” agreed Anthony, “but I’ll have plenty of help. There’s no way we Slytherins would ever want to owe our very existence to your behavior so while the Gryffindors are busy trying to be heroes and get the kidnapper, we’ll be taking you out.”

Wycliff studied Anthony for a full minute; Anthony stared back. “Is that a promise?” she asked again.

“Yes.”

“Say it!”

“I just did,” Anthony told her coolly. “If that’s not enough for you then nothing is.” He would not jump through hoops for Wycliff.

Wycliff stared at Anthony for an even longer time; Anthony stared back, waiting. Then she nodded. “Very well,” she said finally. Some of the tenseness seemed to melt out of her body as she spoke and the wild look left her eyes. “I’ll hold you to it.”

“I figured.”

“You mustn’t tell anyone though,” Wycliff insisted. “They’d try to stop you!”

“Count on it,” agreed Anthony. His career would be ruined if anyone ever found out he had just agreed to kill the famous “Wycliff.” “I presume this means you’ll start eating again?” he asked aloud.

“Yes, I suppose.”
“And no one has to worry about, you know, you trying to, ah, commit suicide?”
“No. You’ll take care of things,” she told him serenely. “I’d like it to be quick and painless if possible,” she added, “and sneaky. Sneaky would be better.”
“Sneaky?”
“Yes sneaky. They’ll be terribly angry afterwards; they won’t understand so it would be better for you if you could manage it so no one knows.”
“Knows?” echoed Anthony in disbelief. Were they really having this conversation?
“Yes. I never really understood about Dumbledore and the Headmaster until now,” she added. “How things could have gotten that desperate. It must have been so horrible for him afterwards, knowing that nobody understood… I could write you a letter or something explaining,” she offered thoughtfully. “Perhaps that would help…”
“Dumbledore? Headmaster? What the?”
“Dumbledore? Headmaster? What the?” thought Anthony in confusion. “Uh, that won’t be necessary,” he managed to say aloud, “because I won’t have to do anything.” And if he did, he’d never rely on some letter from Wycliff to get out of it!
“You really believe that, don’t you,” she stated softly staring at Anthony with new interest.
“That’s because, uh, I can’t tell you!” Anthony replied. A new idea suddenly formed in his mind…
“Why?”
“That’s all part of the investigation,” he told her, “and you’ve got to be one of my Advisors before I can talk to you about it.”
“That’s not true,” she stated flatly.
“Actually, it is,” Anthony assured Wycliff, “because I won’t talk to you about it unless you agree to be one of my Advisors.”
“An Advisor?”
“I’ve got three now,” Anthony continued. “A Ravenclaw, a Gryffindor and a Slytherin. I should have a Hufflepuff too,” he added, “and I want you!”
“No.” Suspicion suddenly filled her face.
“I’m not asking you to become a tool,” Anthony hastened to assure Wycliff. “You don’t have to say a thing if you don’t want to,” he continued, “but most everyone here likes you and if you stood with me then they’ll support me too. You owe me!” he added. “You didn’t think I’d give my promise for nothing did you?” He had, actually; big mistake—something for nothing; hopefully, she wouldn’t see it that way…
“All right,” Wycliff said slowly. “I’ll be your advisor.”
Anthony gave a mental sigh of relief.
Then Wycliff continued, “It’s a good excuse for me to be around you a lot,” she added thoughtfully. “It’ll make it easier for you to do, you know, keep your promise…” She smiled cheerfully and Anthony cringed mentally at her happy anticipation. What had he gotten himself into? “So what’s with the investigation?” Wycliff questioned eagerly.
“Ah, not now,” Anthony told her. He was suddenly very much aware of the audience. “There’s some things you need to see first,” he added explaining. “After dinner,” he suggested remembering she probably hadn’t eaten in a while. “O.K.?”
“O.K.?” she said gravely.
Anthony rose. His action broke the Muffliato spell with a loud “pop” in his ears. “Show’s over!” he announced to the students surrounding them. “Get back to doing, whatever you were doing before.” He turned and offered Wycliff his hand to help her up. She took the hand and stood slowly leaning heavily on his arm. “See,” he told the students, none of whom had left. “Wycliff’s fine! Nothing to see! Now, go!” The group cheered and surged forward quickly surrounding the two.
“Are you O.K.?” Smith asked Wycliff with concern while totally ignoring Anthony. “We were so worried…”
“I’m fine,” Wycliff assured her, “just a little dizzy.”
“Let me help,” Smith said taking a firm hold of Wycliff’s other arm and elbow to provide support.

“Let me help too!” exclaimed several other Hufflepuffs excitedly crowding closer.

“No!” exclaimed Smith. “Give her some space!” she commanded. The group obediently backed away. “What’d you say?” Smith asked Anthony curiously as the two held onto Wycliff while she attempted a rather shaky step.

“A lot of things,” Anthony answered lightly, “She did too—but mostly how she needs to use the loo…” That was a guess, but considering she supposedly hadn’t moved in a while, Anthony was fairly certain it was true…. “Huckaby!” he commanded spotting her face among the crowd. “If you would,” he said suggestively while holding up Wycliff’s arm, “I’d rather not be the one who accompanies her there…” Huckaby stepped forward and took hold. “After dinner,” he promised Wycliff and made his way through the Hufflepuffs until he found Head Girl Woods who stood on the outside edge of the other Hufflepuffs.

She stepped from the rest of the group and moved next to Anthony. “Thank you,” she said sincerely. “What did you say?”

“You can call off the watch and return her wands now,” informed Anthony while ignoring her question.

“Watch?”

“Suicide watch!” Anthony stated. “Why wasn’t I informed?”

“There was no need,” she answered coolly. “We take care of our own!”

“As Headmistress’ Assistant, I am responsible for everyone’s welfare!” Anthony told her. “I expect to be notified of anything else like this.” Anthony hadn’t really thought about the rest or their welfare until he realized that any student left behind would reflect on him when they returned…

“Of course,” came Woods calm answer. But she didn’t sound very sincere.

Anthony turned and headed back towards the Slytherin table.

“What’d you promise?” Fitzpatrick demanded in a low voice while grabbing Anthony by the arm and pulling him to a stop before Anthony had scarce taken a step. The Potters and Weasleys crowded next to him, listening.

“Whatever it took to get her off the floor,” replied Anthony. “And if you want to know more go ask her yourself.” Anthony shook himself free of Fitzpatrick’s grip and straightened his robes. “I’m calling an Advisor meeting tonight after dinner in the Room of Requirement,” he informed Fitzpatrick. “Wycliff’ll be with us. Tell Pilkington…. ” Then Anthony continued walking making it all the way to the Slytherin table without further interruption.

“What’d you say?” questioned Scorpius curiously when Anthony had reached the Slytherin table.

“I told her the truth, of course,” answered Anthony in a voice loud enough to be heard by everyone at the table. He was getting tired of the question. “That Wycliff is the biggest, laziest con artist around and I was tired of everyone catering to her every wish!” he said with open disgust. “She got mad and sat up to argue with me. I should have insisted on talking to her sooner,” Anthony concluded. “Advisor meeting tonight after dinner,” he added in a lower voice, one meant only for Scorpius. He nodded.

“Look, there’s Basu,” commented Corwin. Anthony and the rest of the students at the table looked up and saw Basu imperiously sweep into the hall followed by three younger students. The younger students, two Firsts and a Second, all carried potted plants in their hands. The plants were small but the leaves unfurled and opened up, stems and branches seemed to thicken and get larger as the group moved to the table.

“The seeds will grow!” Basu announced proudly while the other students set the plants on the table for everyone to inspect.

“What are they?” asked Grufudd curiously.

“Those two are apple,” began Basu pointing to two plants on the end, “that’s an orange, a lemon, a grape and a tomato,” she continued while pointing out the plants.

“Good job!” murmured Anthony appreciatively.
“Getting fruit could be a problem, though,” Basu added thoughtfully.
“Oh? Why?”
“No bees to pollinate.”
“I guess that’s our next problem,” sighed Anthony. “We’ll discuss it at dinner.”
Chapter 12

Fitzpatrick is right,” stated Wycliff firmly. “There isn’t a mean bone in Nadia’s body. But there were only eight of us that day and if the rest of us didn’t tell anyone then it had to be Naida…” They were all in the Room of Requirement staring idly at the quills and ink jars. Unlike their response towards Scorpius, Pilkington and Fitzpatrick accepted Wycliff’s inclusion as “Advisor” with no difficulty. It hadn’t taken them long to bring her up to date with what they knew or didn’t know about their kidnappers.

“The inconsistencies do fit with the knowledge of a 3rd year,” agreed Pilkington reluctantly. “But I do not think she has the ability to create all of this. Nor the motive. Someone must have used her memories…”

“Which means someone else is out there besides Nadia…”

“Someone connected to Turay,” put in Anthony Richards directing the group’s attention back to her and off of motive! Wycliff seemed to look at him expectantly with gleaming eyes every time the word motive was mentioned… “What did you learn about Turay?” he questioned Pilkington.

“Turay?”

“Yeah, you surely asked around about her didn’t you?”

“Turay’s a 3rd year Ravenclaw, or would be if she were here,” began Pilkington. “She is good with spells, and very precise with her work. She scored high in all her classes except broom riding, which she eventually passed. She never needs help with the password, is quiet, reads, writes a lot and has Hyperopia.”

“Hyperopia? What’s that?”

“Is fa—wears glasses,” informed Pilkington dryly. “Other than that, she wears dated fashions, and seems to fancy black.”

“What about her family?” questioned Scorpius.

“Turay is not a wizard name,” stated Pilkington.

“What else?”

“It could have English or Scottish origins, but it’s most likely West African which would explain Turay’s darker skin colour. Possibly one, or both of her parents are West African or Egyptian.”

“What else?”

“That’s it.”


“She’s been in Ravenclaw for two years! Don’t you know more about Turay than that? What do her friends say?”

“They say the same,” replied Pilkington. “Turay didn’t talk about herself.”

“That means she’s hiding something,” Scorpius concluded.

“But what?” agreed Anthony. “If Turay is not a wizard name then she’s Half-blood or Mudblood,” he concluded aloud.

“Watch your language!” said Fitzpatrick angrily as he shoved Anthony roughly against the wall.

“Ki-ah!” shouted Wycliff bringing her hand rapidly down on Scorpius’ wrist causing him to drop his wand in surprise. Before Anthony could process what was going on, Wycliff had ducked down, picked up the wand, taken a step back and was pointing Scorpius’ wand at him! “Don’t you dare threaten my friends!” she challenged!

“Calm down!” said Pilkington stepping between the four. “They aren’t the enemy,” she reminded Fitzpatrick and Wycliff, “even if they act like it.”

Anthony pulled himself off the wall and straightened his clothes. “The Hogwarts Code of Conduct demands that we treat each other with respect,” he began...
“Which should start with you!” scolded Pilkington before he could finish. “And seriously, if you wish to lead I’d advise you to not use offensive terminology…”

“Turay’s not here,” Anthony said defensively. “I had no idea you were sweet on her,” he added derisively to Fitzpatrick.

“I’m not!” denied Fitzpatrick emphatically, “but don’t you dis my friends!”

“Like you were not dising Anthony?” challenged Scorpius.

“Yeah, well, that’s different; he’s not a friend!” said Fitzpatrick dismissively. “Besides, he started it!”

“And I’m ending it!” stated Pilkington firmly. “Your conclusion is erroneous, Richards,” she continued not giving anyone a chance to respond. “A non-wizard name means nothing. Lots of Slytherins changed their names after Lord Voldemort died,” she informed them.

“So she could be Slytherin?” Fitzpatrick asked in disbelief.

“She’s Ravenclaw!” insisted Pilkington firmly. “The Sorting Hat placed her correctly. But she could have Slytherin relatives,” she conceded.

“No,” argued Anthony. “We’d know if she were related to any of us, especially after last year!”

“Not if she was disowned,” replied Pilkington. “Your family might have never mentioned her name for you to know…”

“You disown family?” asked Fitzpatrick in disbelief. “How could you disown family?”

“If they’re not Slytherin, they don’t belong,” answered Scorpius righteously.

“But, that’s so cruel!”

“None of that gets us anywhere,” put in Wycliff. She set Scorpius’ wand on the table where he could get it easily. “We’ll have to just dig up some more information.” Everyone groaned.

Basu, confident they would eventually solve the bee problem, had enthusiastically drafted every student not otherwise occupied and set them to work digging up dirt. It was scooped up by spoon shovels (serviceware melted together and reshaped,) piled onto the doors, floated over the fence and dumped into Lulu/Cuddles’ old pen. Together they raised the level of half the pen by at least a meter—not quite enough dirt to accommodate tree roots yet, but with the renewing spell, they would have fresh dirt to dig in the morning and could continue filling the pen with more dirt each day until it was. When finished, Basu would transplant all the trees she had sprouted and start a proper orchard. The apples from one or two trees would not be enough to feed 257 students. Wycliff was the only person exempt from work, of course. She was deemed still too weak…

“And on that thought, I suggest we go downstairs and see if the bathrooms are empty,” said Anthony. “I need to clean up and get some sleep.”

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Something was wrong! Holly Wycliff noticed the difference as soon as she woke up. There was something… Worry! And it hadn’t been there before. Holly sat up and looked about. Everything looked the same as it had when she had gone to sleep. What was it? She looked around for Richards. Spying him standing by the doors Holly rose. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and made her way over to him. Anything worth so much “worry” could not bode well. Holly intended to stick close to Richards so he would have an easier opportunity to “do” what he promised to do. It could be any minute now…

“What is it?” she asked as soon as she was close to Richards.

“The room hasn’t reset,” he answered briefly.

“What’s that mean?” Holly questioned.

He looked at her with surprise, like how could she not understand what he said… “The kitchen hasn’t reset either,” he told her. Holly looked at him blankly. “No food!”

Holly gulped. The unthinkable had happened! Sir had provided the most ghastly gruel possible, but she had never starved! (Except by choice and even then, Sir had forced the food down
her throat!) “What’ll we do?” she whispered uncertainly.

Richards looked at Holly; there was a jumble of emotions within, the strongest being worry. “We’ve got the left-overs to eat,” he told her. “That should carry us through the day. But we’ve got to find a way to make the trees bear fruit!”

“They’re growing,” reminded Holly. “Surely they’ll flower and bear something soon…” “Bees!” Richards said shortly. “They won’t bear fruit without pollination and we’ve no bees…”


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A while later Holly Wycliff returned with Susan Breysburry, her sister Carrie and Oliver Febland. They all came to a stop in front of Richards.

“Remember Oliver Febland?” began Holly. Richards nodded politely though his emotions said otherwise. “He said he likes to garden,” Holly continued. Holly remembered him saying that when she sorted him. “And has something to say I think you should hear…”

“You don’t need bees ta pollinate!” Oliver said importantly. “Me mum and dad pollinate th’ strawberries all th’ time in th’ greenhouse. Tain’t hard,” he added. “I could show ya how, if ya like…” he offered.

“I would,” agreed Richards.

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A short time later they were all gathered in Greenhouse 1 staring at rapidly growing plants. Besides Richards, Oliver, Susan, and Carrie, prefects Jeremy Corner, Alyssa Moore and Manasa Basu were also watching. Basu had managed to create a whole tray of strawberry plants. They all looked green and healthy. Several plants had flowers but there were no berries.

Oliver flushed with pride at being the center of attention. He selected a tiny brush from Carrie’s art box. “Ya haf ta be real gentle like an not hurt th’ flower,” he instructed while he took the tip of the brush and dabbed it inside a flower barely touching the yellow center. “There!” he said happily. He held out the brush for everyone’s inspection. There were tiny flecks of yellow on it. “Me mum allus said that yellow bit is th’ magic powder that makes th’ berries!” he told the group. “Now all I have ta do is take this same brush and do th’ same ta th’ next flower an’ th’ next an’ th’ next.” They all watched while Oliver used the same brush to gently dab center after center of strawberry flowers.

“That it?” questioned Richards.

“Yep! Now I do it a few more times just ta be sure.” Oliver used the same brush to daub the flower centers again. Then he stood back. “That should do it!” he announced with satisfaction.

Basu moved forward. She sprayed something on the ground around each plant Oliver had worked on. The flowers lost their petals and several berries rapidly formed, got bigger and turned red. She plucked the berries from the plant, handed the first one to Richards and then passed one to each person watching taking the last for herself.

Holly Wycliff studied the strawberry she had received. It was rather small, about the size of a marble, but looked perfect in every way and smelled right too. Suddenly Holly flashed back on the last time she had looked at a strawberry, really looked at it—Sir had given it to her! Holly shuttered and forced her attention on the strawberry in front of her. She bit cautiously into it. It tasted right too. She had never managed to eat that other strawberry from Sir but it had been so beautiful, so perfect…

“That’s a lot of hand labour,” commented Jeremy thoughtfully. His words jolted Holly out of the past bringing her back to the present. “Perhaps we can make a rolling puff ball or something.”

“But we’d still have to get the ball from flower to flower,” mused Prefect Moore.

“The paint brush won’t work with the tomatoes,” commented Basu, no prefect Basu.
“Wasn’t O’Shea prefect? How had Basu gotten to be prefect?” wondered Holly.
“Ya have ta use a skinnier paint brush, that’s all,” answered Oliver. He reached into Carrie’s art box and pulled out a different brush. “Like this.” And he held the brush out for all to see.
“That looks more like a hair than a brush,” commented Basu.
“It’s thin like a bee’s leg,” answered Susan informatively. She really liked insects and knew a lot about them. “That’s where all the pollen collects on a bee.”
“You mean it doesn’t have to be a bee?” questioned Holly.
“Of course not,” Susan replied. “Just an insect that goes from flower to flower collecting pollen from one place and spreading it to another. Ants, wasps and flies do it too.”
“Moths?” whispered Holly thoughtfully.
“Sure,” confirmed Susan. “In fact, I always see Hawk moths around flowers…”
“I’ve an idea,” said Holly excitedly. “Wait here!”
Holly moved swiftly back to the Great Hall. Looking around the Gryffindor table she spied Lily and Jordon (Vaughn) (both G4) sorting the food. “Do you have some of those salmon treats for Sapphire?” Holly asked Lily. The Salmon treats were a Weasley product for cats. They were basically salmon flavoured bits with wings attached that fluttered and had to be caught before they could be eaten. Holly would have gotten some for Sasha, but had never made it past the first few steps into Diagon Alley.
“A few,” answered Lily.
“That will have to do.” Holly decided aloud. “Could you get them for me?”
“Sure. Why?”
“I think we can use them with the plants,” Holly answered.
“Really? Then you should talk to Rose and Hugo.”
“Why?”
“They spent the summer helping Uncle George in his store. They know how to make the Salmon treats…”
“They do? That’s terrific! Let’s get them too!”

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A few minutes later the four, Holly, Lily, Hugo and Rose breathlessly trooped into Greenhouse 1 carrying a half filled box of Salmon treats and a bag of rejected food scraps…
“Oh no!” Holly exclaimed when the box was opened and Holly saw the fluttering salmon pink coloured wings. “They haven’t any legs!”
“That shouldn’t be any problem,” answered Rose importantly. “We can make ‘em with legs. Just show us what you want. So Oliver daubed some more strawberry flowers (new blooms had formed in Holly’s absence,) while explaining everything to Rose and Hugo. Then Rose and Hugo got together with the Ravenclaw prefects to design something that would flutter from flower to flower with slender paintbrush hairs attached to the bottom to collect and transfer the pollen…

While they worked on modifying the moths, Basu got more students outside digging dirt and filling Lulu’s pen. There was no shortage of help. A producing garden and orchard became a necessity once the prefects reported no food in the kitchen. The castle grounds rapidly became bare of grass and dirt. Beneath the dirt was a smooth unbroken slate grey surface of unknown material. No one argued they were still at Hogwarts. The grim, seamless surface where the dirt and lawn had once been demonstrated to all the reality of their prison.

By dinner, however, every student was able to eat two fresh strawberries and an eighth of an apple, food grown solely through student effort. It wasn’t much, but held the promise they wouldn’t starve…

**********

“Where are you going?” asked Wycliff bluntly.
“The loo,” Anthony Richards answered automatically. That was a mistake. It was Wycliff he
was talking to, not the Gryffindor sentry watching the hall…

“Where are you really going to?” persisted Wycliff not phased by Anthony’s answer.

“Away!” he told her, “alone!” If he didn’t give her an answer, she couldn’t catch him in a lie.

“Nope,” she told him determinedly. “I’m going with you; you don’t look well.”

“I’m fine!” insisted Anthony though he was feeling a little warm and his head hurt.

“Yeah, right,” agreed Wycliff sarcastically. “So where are we going?”

“Drat!” Ever since the kitchen hadn’t reset, Wycliff had been watching him like a hawk, sticking to him like a leech whenever possible. She seemed to feel the arrival of the kidnapper was eminent. No doubt she wanted to make sure she was near enough for Anthony to “keep his promise,” when the kidnapper arrived. Not that Wycliff would object to what he wanted to do, Anthony just didn’t want her around.

“What’s going on?” came the harsh demanding voice of Fitzpatrick. “What are you two up to?” he added walking up to Anthony and Wycliff.

“Uh…” It was tempting to give up and go back to bed; he was tired enough to, but there were things he had to do, now, and not later. “I’m going to the dungeons, alone!” Anthony told Fitzpatrick. “Why don’t you entertain Wycliff until I get back,” he suggested. He started walking down the stairs towards the dungeons. Unfortunately, Wycliff followed along behind him and Fitzpatrick kept pace with her.

“Why are we going to the dungeons?” questioned Fitzpatrick as they walked.

“Figure it out for yourself,” replied Anthony uncooperatively.

“The Potions Room?” guessed Wycliff. Anthony didn’t answer. There wasn’t much else of interest in the dungeons now that the dorms were gone…

“Why the Potions Room?” persisted Fitzpatrick. Anthony ignored him and focused on walking instead. He was tired; his head hurt; his vision was blurry and his stomach was gurgling. He’d definitely felt better.

“Seeds!” answered Wycliff.

“Huh?”

“There’s seeds in the Potions Room!” she explained. “Perhaps they’re eatable! We need to eat something besides apples and strawberries!”

Rather than risk a day without food, Basu and the “pollination teams” had worked through the night. Basu sprouted more strawberries and grew more trees from the seeds saved. Febland taught the firsts and seconds how to hand pollinate. A bunch of Gemino-created paintbrushes enabled them to pollinate and collect the resulting strawberries. The older students took on the task of apple production. While one group experimented to find a “leg” design that would pick up and transfer pollen from blossom to blossom, others worked to get the moths to move from flower to flower pollinating before the blossoms dropped. At the same time, the third and fourth year students used their brooms or practiced levitation spells on other trees to hand pollinate what they could.

The results had been worth it; whether or not the kitchen reset, no student would go hungry in the morning, but everyone was exhausted from their efforts. Anthony cancelled the morning prefect meeting and told everyone to get some much-needed sleep. Then Anthony laid awake waiting for everyone else to fall asleep before venturing out on his own…

“I thought potion seeds were spelled against accidental germination,” said Fitzpatrick.

“This isn’t Hogwarts,” reminded Anthony aloud. “Maybe these seeds aren’t spelled.” His words implied that Wycliff’s guess for the purpose of their visit had been correct. If the seeds had been spelled, Anthony knew several Slytherins who managed to germinate potion seeds the previous year; he could get them to do it again…

Collecting potion seeds was actually a pretty good idea, one Anthony wished he had thought of; probably would have if he hadn’t felt so hot and tired. While the other students were busy pollinating, Anthony had found a quiet corner in the orchard and stayed up reading Basu’s potion book; she agreed to let him look through it, but wouldn’t let the book out of her sight. So Anthony
pretended to “supervise” the others while actually reading… Anthony remembered reading several
potions that used seeds and roots as part of their ingredients. Were they useful as actual food or only
in potions? Anthony didn’t know, but surely someone did. How many seeds did it take to make a
loaf of bread? It hurt Anthony’s head just to think about it.

**********

There was something fundamentally wrong about a potions room empty of the usual cauldrons
simmering and the hustle and bustle of students muting any cave-like echo of the room. Some leaves,
a spoon, and a small black lump of something sat conspicuously on one of the back counters—
probably a reset experiment of some sort. The lump looked vaguely familiar somehow. Anthony
stared blankly it trying to figure out what the lump was, but gave up; it wasn’t important.

“Wait here,” Anthony told the others and started towards the potions cabinets. Students were
supposed to bring their own potion supplies for the year but Slughorn kept an extra supply of
materials, which he sold at outrageous prices, to any student unfortunate enough to “run out.”

“Fat chance,” Fitzpatrick told Anthony bluntly as he followed Anthony to the cabinet.

Anthony stopped. “Then you and Wycliff take the next one while I go through this one,” he
suggested. The cabinet nearest Anthony was labeled A-H and the other was I-Z. “We can get done
sooner that way…” Anthony turned his back on Fitzpatrick and started randomly pulling out drawers
while using his body to block his actions from view.

“Help me with these bags, Conner,” said Wycliff. Her voice sounded behind and to the right
of Anthony near the other cabinet. Anthony sensed, more than saw, Fitzpatrick move away. Then he
saw Fitzpatrick’s tall figure in the corner of his eye next to Wycliff. Anthony breathed a mental sigh
of relief. He swiftly pulled out the bag he had brought along and started dumping various items from
the cupboard into it. He had no real idea what he was doing other than gathering up ingredients that
looked promising: Baneberry, Belladonna, Bloodroot, Death Cap…

From the other cupboard, he could hear Wycliff talking. “I think you can eat nettle,” she began

“Yeah, it’s eatable,” he confirmed. “And the thistle is too. What about Hogsbane?” he
questioned. “It’s got the word “hog” in it…”

“Definitely not!” stated Wycliff firmly. “That stuff’s nasty! Nor water hemlock, if you see it,”
she added.

“Hemlock, well, duhhh,” Fitzpatrick answered dryly…

“Hemlock! Right!” thought Anthony. He pulled out another drawer and emptied the contents
in his bag.

“Here, add this; it’s scurvy grass!” said Wycliff. “That sounds promising.”

“Yeah, if you want scurvy!”

“No! You eat it to get rid of the scurvy!” Wycliff said in an impatient voice. “That’s what the
sailors used to eat! That could be very useful.”

“Not if the lemon and orange trees start producing…”

“So we eat the grass for a salad! Have some imagination!” she scolded.

“Then we should get the knotgrass and snakegrass too,” he replied.

“Good thinking! What about sneezewort? They surely don’t use it to sneeze!”

Anthony tucked his bag in the special pocket he had had sewn into the lining of his robe. The
pocket was designed to hold his copy of the *Hogwarts Code of Conduct* but it could hold other
things as well… Then he pulled an empty bag from off the shelf and filled it with a bunch of dried
roots and plants: Asphodel, Dandelion, Ginger, Gillyweed… They looked shriveled and ugly, but
maybe they could be rehydrated and grown…

When he had finished, Anthony turned and looked again at that black lump on the counter.
His head spun at the movement but he had remembered what it was: a bezoar! That could be useful.
Anthony took several unsteady steps until he was within reach. His legs felt surprisingly weak.
Using the counter for support, Anthony stretched out, grabbed the bezoar and stuffed it in his pocket.
Then he headed to Wycliff and Fitzpatrick while leaning heavily on the counter and cupboard edge as he moved. “I’m done,” he told them and thrust the bag full of roots at Wycliff. “Give this to Basu,” he added while gripping tightly to the cupboard edge. “She’ll know what to do with them.”

“Why don’t you?” asked Fitzpatrick bluntly.

“I, uh, think I need to get some sleep,” and the world seemed to fade and go black.

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Mrs. Paige Brenna Crowley stood. She drew out her wand and tapped the polished wooden door lightly three times. The shiny surface blurred and glowed. Soon she was facing a full-length mirror. Paige removed the Celtic knot (Triquetra today) brooch from her shoulder and untwisted the rosemary sprig that she had wound around the brooch. Then she re-tied her green spidersilk scarf fashionably about her neck and re-pinned the brooch without the sprig.

DeWitt’s investigation revealed that the brooch had been made for a wizard family some 75 years earlier. Officially, the family claimed to have no knowledge of how the brooch had left their possession and was pleased to issue Paige a receipt of ownership for the brooch in exchange for five galleons and some samples of Paige’s best selling potions. Unofficially, DeWitt learned the brooch was part of a large bribe used to secure a family member’s release from Azkaban prison. Umbridge had been head of the Muggle-Born Registration Commission at the time and the member had been convicted of being a blood traitor who helped a “magic thief” (Muggle-born Hufflepuff) evade Ministry justice. Umbridge had approached Larry last spring and traded something (Larry wouldn’t tell DeWitt what) for removing any old spells and curses on the brooch and resetting it for a new owner... None of that got the Ministry any closer to Umbridge’s current location but it confirmed she was still in Great Britain instead of having fled the country.

Paige pinned the rosemary sprig on the lapel of her emerald green wizard robe and slipped the robe over her shoulders. The sprig needed to be exposed to the open air at all times; it revealed the presence of airbourne Serenity by turning brown. DeWitt was under strict instructions to inform Paige immediately if the rosemary turned brown. There was no Sir to use Serenity, but it never hurt to be sure. Paige smoothed her long black hair artfully over her shoulder (not the same side as the rosemary sprig) and checked to make sure the spiraling gold serpent that she used to keep her hair in place was showing to its best advantage. It was the little touches that made all the difference.

When she was finished, Paige drew out her wand again and tapped the mirror turning it back into a hard polished door. She opened the door and poked her head through to the other side—Tom’s store. “I’m leaving,” she announced to DeWitt. He looked up from the book he was reading and nodded. Paige read the title easily: Hot Witches! The cover displayed a malnourished witch showing more skin than clothes, waving a lit wand over a cauldron balanced over a burning fire. Pure trash! Totally inappropriate for the store’s image! Paige would complain except she had other things on her mind and no one but DeWitt was in the store. It was a slow day. Paige closed and locked the door from her side. Then she moved to the door that opened to the outside. She lit the red security candle that informed clients she was out and placed it on the window ledge. Afterwards, Paige opened the door and stepped out onto Knockturn Alley.

Business was brisk in Knockturn Alley. The Ministry had not found the children. There was no word from a kidnapper or kidnappers. Desperate parents turned to any method possible to locate their loved ones before it was too late. Paige wove her way between the heavily hooded figures, parents trying to hide their identities, ashamed to be in Knockturn Alley, but there anyway. They were easy prey for every unscrupulous charlatan selling hope: promising to send messages by dream or otherwise, selling “long distance” wards against danger, performing lost child spells...

Paige turned onto Diagon Alley. The main entrance to Tom’s store was on Diagon Alley. Diagon alley looked practically empty. Shopping was no longer a socializing event but done only as a necessity, if at all. The few people Paige saw moved quickly, anxious to be elsewhere, looking. Grieving parents had closed their shops in order to devote their time to hunting for their children. The few stores that remained open were draped with good luck messages and nearly empty of customers. Like Knockturn Alley, every spare bit of wall and window space was plastered with faces, posters of missing students, most offering rewards for their safe return...

Paige swept down Diagon Alley ignoring the other witches and wizards, as she usually did. She turned into the tiny curio shop at the end of the Alley. Wizard Terry Boot, the proprietor of the
shop looked up at her entrance. He stood up hastily setting down the newspaper in his hand as he did. No, it looked more like a map than a newspaper. “How may I help you, Mrs. Crowley?” he asked courteously.

“I understand you sell message scrolls,” Paige stated imperiously. One of the first assignments she had given Anthony was to enter each shop on Diagon Alley, take note of the items it sold and report back with an eye for what items might also be sold in Tom’s store. As a result, Paige knew the contents of every store on Diagon Alley.

“I do,” answered Boot quietly while watching her closely. Paige rarely visited the other shops let alone Boot’s tiny place. Of course, without Anthony to do it and Tom in near mourning over Anthony’s disappearance, who was left to do the shopping?

“I presume you discount bulk orders?”

“Perhaps,” he answered cautiously. “It depends on the order…”

“I should like to see your wares first,” Paige demanded.

“Of course.”

Paige waited while Boot fetched a variety of small parchment scrolls from one of his dusty shelves.

He laid them down on the counter before her. One by one he unrolled the scrolls. Each contained a short message in beautiful calligraphy writing and an appropriate moving picture: flying dragons, bats, sprouting flowers forming into a bouquet, puffy hearts with arrows shooting through them…

“Can you make them more for our tastes?” Paige asked bluntly when he had finished.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” questioned Book carefully.

“Snakes—green snakes, vipers, clover and golden grass…” Paige listed several items that were emblematic to Slytherins. “And flowers,” she added thoughtfully. “Rhododendron, Oleander, Achillea Millefolia, Yarrow… Something like that,” she concluded in an airy voice.

Boot’s eyes widened at her words. Boot was more than a simple shop owner. He was also an auror and Potions Master. Paige was his apprentice and he oversaw all her potion preparations. As such, Boot surely knew the meaning of the “flowers” Paige mentioned: the first three meant “warning or danger;” the last two meant: “war!” It insured he would take this encounter very seriously.

Boot nodded his head slowly. “Yes,” he told her. “That could be done… What message would you wish?”

“A get well message,” Paige told him, “something simple but heartfelt.”

“Get well soon?” suggested Boot.

“More like: May your beloved child get well soon…” revised Paige.

“Of course,” agreed Boot promptly. He didn’t ask, but Boot was Ravenclaw. Paige was certain he knew the card could only be intended for a Slytherin parent with a missing child… He would also guess that something had happened to make the parent think their child was in less-than-good health. The easiest answer to that was a change in a Healthstone colour, which would be correct. “Would you like that personalized?” he questioned no doubt trying to learn the name of the family…

“That’s not necessary,” refused Paige. That information was held in strict confidence between the Slytherins. “The name can be added later when the card is ready to send…”

“As you wish,” agreed Boot.

“How many cards do you wish?”

“Seventy,” answered Paige in a calm voice.

Boot choked. “Seven or seventy?” he asked having visible difficulty maintaining a calm composure.

“Seventy,” answered Paige firmly.

“That’s not necessary,” refused Paige. That information was held in strict confidence between the Slytherins. “The name can be added later when the card is ready to send…”

“As you wish,” agreed Boot.

“How many cards do you wish?”

“Seventy,” answered Paige in a calm voice.

Boot choked. “Seven or seventy?” he asked having visible difficulty maintaining a calm composure.

“Seventy,” answered Paige firmly.

“Of course. But… are you certain?”

“Well, thirty-three defects,” Paige began. That was the number of Slytherin students whose Healthstones had changed colour. The Ministry may or may not have that number. “Twenty-nine
maybe’s,” she continued. That was the number of Slytherin students whose parents did not have Healthstones. The parents were of the opinion that their children shared whatever fate the Healthstone children were enduring. The two numbers totaled the number of Slytherin students who were missing. Boot would easily recognize that number. “You’re right,” she stated thoughtfully. “Make that eighty. That leaves a few extras for later sales…” The original number she quoted did not take into account any possible Slytherin “Firsts” as they had yet to be sorted… Discrete inquiries seemed to indicate that only the Slytherin Healthstones had turned purple. The Slytherin parents had resolved to suffer in private choosing to not expose their pain to the outside community. As a member through marriage of one of the affected families, Paige was bound by those wishes.

“Of course,” agreed Boot. “When would you like these?”

“Immediately,” answered Paige.

Boot’s face paled. “Immediately?” he echoed softly.

“Yes,” confirmed Paige. “By the end of the day or sooner.” It was a tall order but the message was more important than the receipt of the item. Though the scrolls would likely become useful. “And I’ll need some of these,” Paige added pointing to one of the other message scrolls. “Just in case.” Boot’s face whitened visibly. Paige had pointed to a “sympathy” scroll. “With appropriate designs, of course,” she added.

“Of course… H-how many?” he asked cautiously.

“Ten,” came the answer. “Maybe more later…” Eight Healthstones, Anthony’s included, showed deep purple, near black. For them, death was eminent. If one of them died, Slytherin grief, pain and fear would explode into action.

The Slytherin parents were certain they had found the motive behind the kidnappings: retribution! It was all part of a macabre plot to get back at the Slytherin students for the previous year’s excesses brought about by Pettigrew’s Hand. Lacking a clear target, the parents threatened to lash out at anyone and everyone. It would be a bloodbath! No one would win and the students would still be missing! Short of healing the missing students, Paige had no idea how to prevent the impending disaster but the Ministry deserved to be warned. She had sworn that much when she took her auror vows...

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Harry Potter drew a deep breath and then knocked firmly on the door in front of him. It opened.

“Mr. Potter!” exclaimed Mrs. Wycliff, Laurel. Her Healthstone shimmered brightly on the chain hanging from her neck. “Is there any news?” she asked anxiously.

“No, ah not really,” Harry amended. Harry breathed a mental sigh of relief at the sight of the Healthstone. That was why he had come. Dean had sent Harry an urgent owl requesting Harry check on the Wycliff Healthstone. Harry was certain there was a reason behind the request besides casual interest and had visited Dean seeking more information…

“Won’t you come in?” invited Laurel. She backed away to permit Harry to enter.

“Thank you,” answered Harry. He really had no need to enter, nothing new to tell her, but refusing would be rude. Harry followed Laurel inside.

“Please, sit down,” suggested Laurel indicating a seat in the living room. “Something to drink? Some tea perhaps?” she offered as Harry sat down.

“No thank you,” answered Harry. “I can’t stay for long…” Laurel nodded and sat in the chair across from Harry.

“I’ve really nothing to say or tell you,” Harry began, “except that, judging from your Healthstone, Holly seems to be fine…” Harry’s voice trailed off. “Wherever she is…” he added mentally. “They all do,” he added encouragingly. “mostly…” he amended silently. Laurel had no reason to know the rest; it didn’t concern her or Dudley.

They still had no idea what had happened or where the Hogwarts students were but things had gone from bad to worse in the magic community. Dean said he got a tip that the Slytherin
Healthstones, all of them, had changed colours! Not just changed, but the Healthstones indicated that some of the students had already died or were near death! Dean was unable to confirm that tip because, when asked, the Slytherin parents all denied even having Healthstones for their children and refused to talk further to the Ministry officials. There was open hostility in their every word.

That all lent weight to the second part of the tip that indicated the Slytherin parents were preparing to engage in battle with the rest of the community, perhaps because of their loss. The idea seemed ludicrous, but Dean had placed the Ministry on Alert; Ministry Officials patrolled the alleys warily; the aurors were all called to active duty; no one knew what would happen next. Things were quiet at the moment, but it was like the lull before the storm. Everyone was on edge with wands raised, waiting.

“I thought it was changing colours a couple days ago, but it brightened up again,” Laurel informed Harry bringing his mind back to the present. “But this stone doesn’t say if she is being tortured or anything…” Laurel added speculatively while looking down at her pendant.

“Ah, no,” admitted Harry reluctantly. “It stays that colour as long as Holly’s physical health remains good. But we’ve no reason to think that something like torture is happening…” he added hopefully. None of the other parents, the non-Slytherin parents reported a change in their child’s Healthstone. Knowing that they could change colours and hadn’t had lifted a major weight of fear and uncertainty from Harry’s shoulders. The knowledge probably wasn’t much comfort for the Slytherin parents.

“But what else could it be?” Laurel questioned.

Harry shook his head. “If we knew, that, “ he began, “we’d be one step closer to finding them. How are you and Du-Dillon doing?” he asked changing the subject.

“We’re managing,” she told Harry. “Dillon goes to work each day and I do,” she glanced briefly around the room, “whatever, to keep busy…”

“I don’t know how you do it,” Harry told her honestly. “Ginny and I, we’re about out of our mind with worry,” he confessed.

“It’s easier this time,” Laurel admitted. “She isn’t dead and we know that. We’re expecting her to come home for Christmas just like last year and the year before…” Laurel’s voice trailed off. That was the year they thought she was dead. “…and I can cry this time!” she suddenly blurted. “Last time, when we thought, thought she was, you know…d—we couldn’t say a thing! The in-laws, you see,” she added in explanation. “They didn’t know! And Dillon couldn’t bring himself to tell—We had to go on as if nothing had happened…” Laurel gulped and abruptly started sobbing. They were loud wracking sobs that moved her whole body up and down. Harry reached out and put his hands on her shoulders. She leaned into him crying even more; Harry could do nothing but hold her shoulders and murmur soothing sounds.

The tears seemed to go on forever but eventually they stopped. “I’m sorry,” sniffed Laurel as she sat up again. Harry fished out a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. “You must think I’m a terrible wuss crying like that but I can’t help myself…” Laurel dabbed her face and eyes with the handkerchief and handed it back to Harry.

“That’s O.K.,” said Harry in a soothing voice while he returned the handkerchief to his pocket. “You’re only doing what we all are doing in the face of such uncertainty. But Holly is strong. She’ll come back to you safe and sound,” he assured her. “They all will.”

“Of course,” agreed Laurel and she managed to smile though her green eyes still glistened with tears.

Harry stood. “I must go now,” he told Laurel. “Thank you for your time.”

Harry quickly left the Wycliff residence. He felt an urgent need to find Ginny, put his arms around her and tell her the same words. Maybe, if he said them often enough, they would come true…

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“Hello, Mr. Potter,” came a courteous voice next to Harry Potter. “May I help you?”
Harry looked down to see Griphook in his scarlet and gold uniform standing next to him. That was no surprise. Harry was in Gringotts. “Hello, Griphook,” replied Harry politely. “I’d like to meet with President Gottenram, if I may.”

“President Gottenram does not meet with wand-carriers,” replied Griphook firmly.
“I realize that,” answered Harry calmly, “but this is important.”
“Is this business related?”
“No,” admitted Harry. “It’s personal. But I don’t know how else to contact him…”

Griphook stared without speaking at Harry with his glittering black eyes.

“It involves Miss Wycliff,” Harry added sensing Griphook was about to refuse. “Could you please ask?”

Griphook stared at Harry for an even longer time; Harry met that gaze squarely trying to convey the seriousness of the matter. Surely he knew of the disappearance of the students.

“Wait here,” Griphook said finally. He turned and walked away vanishing into the blackness of the interior of the bank.

Harry waited.

After a while Griphook returned. “President Gottenram does not meet with wand-carriers,” he repeated imperiously. Harry bowed his head in disappointment. What else could he say to persuade him otherwise? He had to do something, had to try… “…during business hours.”

“Huh?” Harry felt a jolt of hope run through his body. He looked at Griphook afraid he had heard wrong.

“If you will return at nine pm,” Griphook continued in an impersonal voice, “he will meet with you then…”

“Thank you.”

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President Gottenram wore a suit of crimson and royal blue trimmed in gold. He sat regally in an elevated chair and clasped his long thin fingers together on the table in front of him. He regarded Harry’s arrival with stony silence watching Harry with his glittering black eyes.

Harry sat down across from him. “Thank you for agreeing to see me,” Harry began softly when it became clear Gottenram would not speak first. Gottenram did not reply. “It’s about Holly,” added Harry. Silence. “Duh!” Of course, he already knew that, Harry had told Griphook… “She’s missing,” Harry continued. Gottenram might or might not know that.

“I had nothing to with that,” stated Gottenram imperiously.


Harry tried again. “This!” he said raising his wrist that still held an ornate silver band that shone brightly every time he entered Gringotts. “You know where I am when I’m here,” he reminded Gottenram. “You know where Sir is,” he reminded. “Some have suggested that the mark you left on Holly does the same!” Winonan thought so; Pilkington thought it was a possibility… Privately, Harry thought otherwise. Harry would have never attempted going to Gottenram if things weren’t so desperate.

“I only bring this up,” he added, “because, I was hoping that, perhaps you had a way to locate Holly…” Harry trailed off. If they could find Holly, perhaps they would find the other students with her. There was no change in Gottenram’s expression. “I’d be willing to pay for information,” Harry offered. “If it were accurate…”

“Accurate information is more expensive and usually less interesting…”

“Yes, I know,” agreed Harry. “But I value accuracy over false hope.”

Gottenram stirred. “And would you pay if I told you I did not know where she was?” he asked bluntly.

“Yes,” Harry answered firmly. “If the information was accurate. For then I would have one
“I do not know where she is,” Gottenram stated.
Harry nodded. It was the answer he expected. Gottenram had left a tattoo on Holly, not goblin silver, but Harry would never have forgiven himself if he didn’t check for sure, if he didn’t follow every lead to its end no matter how slender.
“She is not underground,” Gottenram added suddenly. “Nor is she with any of ours; I would know.”
That was something. “Is there anything else?” Harry asked hopefully.
“No.”
“Will you tell me if you learn something?”
There was a long silence. Then, “Yes.”
“Thank you,” Harry said and he rose. “I’ll settle the bill with Griphook,” he added. Harry turned and reached for the door when he stopped.
There was a tiny shelf next to the door. It hadn’t been there before. On the shelf was a familiar jar. It looked something like an old-fashioned milk bottle with a big fat cork in the top. Harry remembered seeing it before. He had given it to Griphook. But it had been filled then with colourful jewel-like pills. This jar was empty. Harry reached out cautiously and picked up the jar.
“There is no charge,” came Griphook’s voice. “Not today.”
“Thank you.” Harry opened the door and left the room.

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Chapter 14

Dear Grandmum,

The week is almost over. I am looking forward to sleeping in. Then I hope to explore a bit…”

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“Live, Richards, live!” a voice whispered insistently in Anthony Richard’s ear. “If you die I swear I won’t go to your funeral!”

That sounded vaguely familiar to Anthony, but unimportant… A lone grave appeared in Anthony’s mind. The gray tombstone at the head of the grave turned pink and dissolved into salmon pink butterflies that swirled in his head. The butterflies turned into moths that swirled and swirled filling Anthony’s mind with pink which darkened to red and maroon and then got darker and darker fading into blackness.

“You’d better not die, Richards,” another voice whispered. “Because if you die, I’m gonna be stuck being in charge! And I don’t want to be in charge! So live, do you understand? Live!”

The salmon pink moths returned springing out of endless unfurling green leaves that got darker and darker green…

“Stay alive Richards!” a voice ordered. “If you die, I’ll tell everyone it was because you didn’t want to keep your promise! A Slytherin without honour; that’s what they’ll say! They’ll disown you!”

Promise? What promise? Knives, daggers and nooses swirled between shriveled black roots and berries going faster and faster blurring into nothingness.

“Live! Damn you, live!” the voice kept whispering in Anthony’s ear, “or I’ll tell everyone you brought Pettigrew’s Hand to Hogwarts last year!”

“HAND!?” A silvery hand appeared in Anthony’s vision; it reached out to Anthony growing larger and larger until all that could be seen were the lines of a metallic palm getting closer and closer until it all blurred into fuzzy silver nothing!

“Yes, I know!” the voice assured. “You ooze guilt every time it’s mentioned! And I’ll tell the world what you did!” the voice promised. “The rest of the students will hate you! You’ll be the embarrassment of all the Slytherins! No one will ever go to your funeral even if they held one! Live!”

“Live!”

“Live!”

“Live!”

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Dear Grandmum,

They have a big garden here with all sorts of vegetables and another with flowers; the flowers are very pretty…

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The shadowy shapes overhead coalesced into something resembling heads. Anthony Richards wondered vaguely who…

“I think he’s awake,” said a voice. Anthony absently wondered who “he” was, but not for long. It didn’t matter.

Anthony felt his head lifted. “Drink this,” a voice ordered. He opened his mouth and swallowed. It was something good, a broth perhaps… He swallowed some more and then sank back
into peaceful oblivion.

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“…and while you’re stewing your horned slugs you’re supposed to weigh the nettles. Then you crush the snake fangs… How do you crush snake fangs? Do you do it with a rock or something? Is there a special mortar and pestle for fangs or something? Why don’t they come crushed? That sounds much easier…”

Anthony opened his eyes. Darkness. No, not quite. There was darkness overhead and the familiar flicker of torch flames beneath. Where was he? Outside somewhere? No, that didn’t feel right either. But everything looked familiar somehow...

“…And at the very last,” the voice continued, ’you’re supposed to add the porcupine quills but there’s a note saying you need to remove the cauldron from the fire first. I wonder why? What happens if you don’t?”

Anthony turned his head to look at the speaker. It was somebody young, a boy with sandy coloured hair and lots of freckles holding a book in his fat fingers. He looked vaguely familiar…

“You bottle—Oh, you’re awake!” the boy said cheerfully. “I’ll let them know…” He rose from his seat and left leaving Anthony a clearer view of the room. The flickering torchlights revealed shadowy shapes that appeared to be beds, lots of beds! Anthony could see the faces of people, students, sitting in chairs between the beds, everywhere. And beyond that… glints of silver sparkled like stars in the night… But it didn’t feel as if he were outside… Why was he lying down in the Memorial?

The boy returned; Anthony abruptly remembered his name, Averdall! Averdall, Mason. Anthony had memorized the name of all the Firsts in anticipation of the Sorting Ceremony. With him was Woods, Head Girl Woods, Anthony suddenly remembered. With that memory, came more memories, mostly not good—of a kidnapping, and a fake Hogwarts…

Woods whispered something in Averdall’s ear. He nodded and left again while Woods sat down in the chair next to the Anthony’s bed. “How are you feeling?” she asked, her face filled with concern.


“You passed out,” Woods said bluntly.

“Why?”

“You were sick.”

“That’s impossible!” Anthony denied. “I’ve never been sick!” Woods didn’t argue. “It was poison!” Anthony decided aloud.

“Kinda,” Woods agreed.

“Somebody poisoned me! Who did it?” he demanded. “Was it the kidnappers?”

“We don’t think so…”

“Then who? O’Shea? Jealous of me being in charge?”

“No. No one did it.”


“You did.”

Anthony stared at her without comprehension.

Woods sighed. “It’s called food poisoning,” she told him. “It happens when left-over food isn’t stored properly. It goes bad after a while. You were eating the left-overs of the left-over leftovers that wasn’t stored properly. It was very bad food.”

“Huh?” Anthony had never heard of such a thing.

“It’s a common Muggle problem,” Woods added dismissively. “Wizard food is always kept perfectly chilled when not used so it doesn’t go bad that way…”
“Did everyone get sick?”
“No,” she admitted.
“Why not?”
“The Muggle-born students warned us. We moved our food outside when not in use where it would stay colder…”
“And you didn’t tell me?”
“Um, actually, Galina Bromadge told her brother Geoffrey. He told Gruffudd. Gruffudd dismissed the notion claiming it was a Ravenclaw trap to get them to move their food out of sight so it would be easier to steal…”

Anthony sighed. It was another time the Firsts had passed word to each other on important matters and the information had been good. Anthony had been tempted to dismiss the first warning outright, as Gruffudd obviously had with the second, except Anthony knew O’Shea and expected her to try something anyway... Firsts were usually of little consequence being so young and inexperienced. That did not seem to be the case this year. Anthony resolved to tell the Firsts to bring him any other news from other Firsts directly from now on... “So did Bromadge get sick too?” he asked curiously.

“No. Geoffrey and the other Slytherin Firsts refused to eat the Slytherin food after Gruffudd dismissed the warning. I think they traded their food portion for money and other supplies. Galina and the other Firsts shared their food with the Slytherin Firsts.”

“So, who did, ah, get sick?”
“All the rest of the Slytherins,” she said flatly.
“The rest?” echoed Anthony in disbelief. That was a lot of students.
“Except Basu,” she amended. “She’s vegetarian. That is why we think it was the meat that was bad. The rest of you were really, really sick,” she told him. “We weren’t sure some of you would pull through... Holly insisted the sickest be placed on a 24-hour watch with someone sitting next to them constantly urging them to stay alive…”

“Alive?” echoed Anthony in confusion. Was he in that group? It would explain some of the weird voices he was remembering...

“We hadn’t any healing potions to give you and couldn’t do much else,” Woods explained, “It took too long to brew the regular potions even if we had all the ingredients needed which we didn’t…”

Anthony felt a twinge of guilt. Had some of the ingredients they had taken from the potions room been needed to brew the potions?

“Fortunately, Corner had a copy of the recently released *A Potion for Every Occasion* book,” Woods continued.

*Every Occasion?*

“Yes, it’s a complete collection of the potion recipes submitted during that Potion Contest Hogwarts had five years ago. There were a lot of Muggle-based recipes in it that were faster to brew and used more common ingredients. They don’t work as well as proper wizard potions, but they helped. The Muggle potions kept you alive until the stronger potions could be made…”

“Oh.”

“Then the kitchen reset…”

“Reset?”

“Yes, and we had food again. Well, we had food before, but everyone was tired of apples and strawberries and tomatoes and cucumbers...” Woods’ voice fell off remembering. Then she resumed, “Anyway, when the kitchen reset, so did the ingredients in the potions room so we were able to brew some wizard potions and eat some proper food. There isn’t one single potion for food poisoning, so Wycliff had us make potions that addressed the symptoms, you know, nausea, headaches, fever... It wasn’t the best solution, but it worked; you’re all still alive and that’s what’s important.”

“I guess so... So all the food’s outside now?”

“No. The Annex didn’t reset with the kitchen so we moved all the food in there and turned it into a huge, uh, icebox. Everything’s been itemized and divided equally. Each student got a paper
listing his or her portion. When they’re hungry, they can go to the Annex and take out their share or they can trade with the other students to get more of one thing and less of another. Two students from each House are in charge of the distribution. The only exceptions to this are the sick students. They receive special food until they are well enough to be released from the infirmary, the Memorial, which doesn’t reset either…”

“What about the apples and strawberries?”
“Apples and strawberries? You mean the food we’ve grown ourselves?”
Anthony nodded.
“It’s more than apples and strawberries now. The plants Basu started are all producing nicely. We’ve also got tomatoes, cucumbers, oranges, grapes, lemons, kiwis, walnuts and chestnuts! They are all stored in the trophy room. It’s been converted into an icebox too. If you’re still hungry after eating your “kitchen” share, you can go there and get as much as you want until we run out, as long as you eat what you get. No wasting of food.”

Averdall returned carrying a tray with a bowl and spoon. A few tendrils of steam curled up from the bowl. “Would you like something to eat?” asked Averdall.

“Uh, yes,” agreed Anthony. He could smell it now, whatever was in the bowl smelled good and he suddenly felt very hungry…

“I’ll leave you to eat,” said Woods. “I’m glad you’re better.” She stood and walked off.

“Think you can sit up?” asked Averdall.

“Course,” assured Anthony. He put his hands down on the bed and pushed, but got nowhere. To his surprise, his arms just didn’t have any strength. “Uh,” he began…

Averdall quickly set the tray on the chair. “Let me help you,” he offered and slid a hand behind Anthony’s shoulders lifting up before Anthony could refuse. Averdall propped pillows up behind Anthony giving him more support. Then Averdall sat down placing the tray on his lap.

“That smells good,” said Anthony. “What is it?”

“Uh, I think it’s a pureed beef and tomato soup,” answered Averdall. “I’ll hold the spoon for you, if you’d like,” he told Anthony as he stirred the soup sending up enticing scents. “You’re probably pretty weak,” he added in explanation as he scooped up a spoonful. “The others have been.” Averdall held the spoon up to Anthony’s lips. Anthony swallowed. It tasted as good as it smelled! “That’s pretty good,” enthused Averdall. “Some more?”

“Yes. Uh, how long was I sick?”

“You still are,” replied Averdall. “But you’re lots better than you were; it’s been near a week since you Slytherins took ill.”

“A week?” echoed Anthony in disbelief.

“Yeah. Some of the older students thought it was some trick to get out of doing your fair share of the work but Wycliff said it was for real. She insisted you all get moved to someplace less drafty and then confiscated the rest of the good food exclusively to feed you because sick people couldn’t be expected to recover by eating just fruit.” Averdall kept filling the spoon with soup and feeding Anthony as he talked. “Some of the other students were not too happy about that,” continued Averdall, “seeing as they said it was your own stupidity that got you sick in the first place, but Wycliff said you couldn’t learn from your mistakes if you were dead! Corner and Woods agreed so that was that. We were all really happy when the kitchen reset, I can tell you!”

Anthony took a couple more spoonfuls when a new thought occurred to him. “Did the kitchen food change?” he asked hesitantly. “I don’t remember a tomato beef soup in the kitchen food.”

“It didn’t and there wasn’t,” confirmed Averdall. “Ever since the kitchen reset, Wycliff’s been taking your share of the food back to the kitchen, and converting it into something more suitable for somebody who was sick to eat.”

“She has?”

“Yeah, she’s been doing that for all the sick students. Said you couldn’t be expected to eat pasties and ham sandwiches in your condition…” Averdall scraped the bowl empty. “That’s the last of the soup,” he told Anthony. “Why don’t you lay back and get some more rest,” he suggested. He
readjusted Anthony’s pillows so he’d be more comfortable. “I’ve got to study for my potions class,” Averdall told Richards as he pulled out his book.

“Potions class?” echoed Anthony. “When did that happen?”

“Soon as the kitchen reset,” Averdall told Anthony. “We’ve all been busy making potions so we’re prepared should someone else get sick. But there’s a lot of potions we aren’t doing and the prefects decided we should learn about the rest too. Miss Kakkar’s teaching it,” he added informatively…” Averdall opened the book, thumbed through pages, stopped and began to read, silently.

“Kakkar,” thought Richards absently. That would be Nikita Kakkar, Ravenclaw, (7th year), not that it mattered…” Richards closed his eyes and went to sleep.

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When Anthony next woke, he heard some sort of commotion. “I tell you, I’m sick!” insisted a familiar voice. Anthony recognized it as that of Ivy Malfoy, Scorpius’ little sister. Looking around, he saw her standing in the doorway clutching her stomach. “Ohhhh!” she moaned. “I hurt so…”

“Are you certain?” came the voice of Albus Potter. “Holly said you were well.”

“It’s a relapse!” she insisted.

“What’s going on?” questioned Anthony.

“Another faker!” answered the bored voice of the First sitting next to Anthony. He couldn’t remember her name, but she had to be a Ravenclaw, judging from her response, cool demeanor and the thick book in her lap she seemed to be reading.

“Faker?” questioned Anthony. “Why would anyone want to fake it?”

“The food’s better in here,” she answered, “no work and there’s beds.”

“Yes. We pulled the beds out of our dorm to use for the sick students—it’s easier to feed you while you’re lying in a bed, but we didn’t think to do it in the beginning, so the infirmary is the only place where everyone has a bed.”

“But didn’t the dorms refresh when the kitchen did?”

“Yes, it did, and we took the beds out immediately, but there still isn’t enough beds for everyone…”

In the background Anthony heard Potter say in a concerned voice, “That sounds bad. We’d better give you some Relapse Potion immediately!”

“We Ravenclaws took the first beds we pulled out;” explained the First, “after all, it was our dorm. Then we raffled off the rest after the kitchen refreshed; Malfoy didn’t get one. There’ll be enough beds for all if the room keeps on refreshing… But we’re not there yet.” Out of the corner of his eye, Anthony saw Potter pull out a huge potion bottle, uncork it and measure out a spoonful of liquid. He held the spoon out for Malfoy to take. She took the spoon, opened her mouth and put the spoon in…

Suddenly Malfoy began choking and coughing! “Water!!” she gasped as she dropped the spoon.

“No, take the second one first,” insisted Potter while Malfoy continued to cough and gag. He picked up the spoon, wiped it off and began to pour again. “It’s better that way,” he advised.

Malfoy pushed away the spoon held in front of her causing it to tip.

“What is that stuff!” she exclaimed loudly!

“That’s the potion for relapses,” explained Fitzpatrick, who stood next to Potter. “Two spoonfuls when you first report symptoms, and another spoonful every hour until your symptoms improve…”

“Seriously?” protested Malfoy. “None of the other potions tasted like that…”

“That stuff was all guesswork,” answered Potter. “Now, we know what we’re doing. See, the directions are on the label.” He held out the bottle for her inspection. “Good thing we were using one of Crowley’s spoons,” he added, “or that second spoonful might have spilled!” he again held the
spoon out to Malfoy’s lips. “After you take it then we’ll set you up with a bed… Open wide…”

Malfoy stared at the spoon. “Forget it!” she suddenly stormed. “I’m not taking that! It’s disgusting!”

“But you have to,” protested Potter. “You’re sick, you said so yourself! We must do whatever it takes to keep you well!”

“I’m not that sick!” she announced and stomped away.

“You sure now?” called out Fitzpatrick. “Cause if you return, we’ll have to start all over…”

“I don’t know what’s in it,” continued the dry voice of the First next to Anthony, “but it works really well; no one has stayed “sick” enough to take a second dose…”

**********

Holly Wycliff walked down the corridor to the Memorial. She felt tired, more than tired, exhausted! Exhausted beyond belief, but she pushed herself to continue.

Holly hadn’t slept properly since, well, since Richards had collapsed. Soon after they brought Richards to the Great Hall, Basu and the Pollinating students brought in several students, all too ill to move on their own. Corner and Woods instituted a head check; more students were discovered in the Great Hall already sick and near collapse. Fear and uncertainty filled the remaining students. What had happened? Why? The fear increased turning into open panic as more students fell ill. Who would be next? What should they do? Most of the students still standing were certain, as was Holly, that the kidnappers had finally made a move…

While other students milled about in confused panic Holly had acted. Richards was down. She had to die before the kidnapper made his presence known… Holly drew her wand and Apparated to the top of Hogwarts to jump off. Or, rather, she tried to. There was no top! The seductive heights she could see from outside did not exist in reality and she again found herself in the Great Hall. So Holly Apparated to the entryway. That attempt worked. She ran up the stairs and grabbed a sword off one of the suits of armour… Winky stopped her. So Holly went back into the Great Hall found Richards where they had left him, grabbed his wrist and unblocked. The collective pain and fear in the Hall crashed down on her. Holly focused on Richards and collapsed into unconsciousness. He was really sick. Perhaps dying. Once Holly had been so sick she had nearly died because a neighbor had been dying and Holly hadn’t known how to block. Cousin Harry had taken Holly away before the neighbor had died; in doing so, he had probably saved Holly’s life. There was no Cousin Harry now. Perhaps she could die with Richards…

When Holly next woke, she found herself in the Room of Requirement, far away from the ill students. Sasha (near invisible, of course,) was lying comfortably on Holly’s chest purring contently.

“Nice try,” stated Jeremy Corner. Jeremy practiced Occlumency; he was good at it. Holly would have never opened her eyes, never admitted she was awake, had she known he was there… Ordinarily, Holly might have been afraid that the person in front of her was actually a kidnapper using polyjuice, but Sasha knew Jeremy and would have warned Holly if he were a stranger. “Might have worked if the illness hadn’t been so House Specific,” Jeremy continued.

“What?”

“Sixty-two Slytherins and one Hufflepuff,” he told her. “It doesn’t take a Ravenclaw to realize your collapse was something other than sickness… Especially when Fitzpatrick said you were fine when you and he brought Richards in… Trouble is,” continued Jeremy, “they’re sick, Holly, really sick and you’re the closest thing to a Healer we have. We haven’t any potions, either,” he reminded her. “We can make potions, but which ones? We need you, Holly, really need you!”

“I can’t,” Holly whispered. “Won’t be tested, won’t be a—” she broke off.

“Richards is one of those sick,” Jeremy reminded Holly as if she hadn’t spoken. “He’s really, really sick. If you let him die, then who will keep that promise he made…”

Holly turned and sat up. “You know?” she asked looking directly at Jeremy.

“We all know,” answered Jeremy. “Not the specifics, of course, but it was something big or you wouldn’t have gotten up afterwards.” Jeremy leaned forward. “What would you say if I told you
I thought this had nothing to do with the kidnappers?"

“But it must be!” insisted Holly. “What else could it be?”

“What else indeed?” he said enigmatically. “Give me a chance to figure things out Holly,” he begged.

“And if you’re wrong? What then?”

“Then you will have saved Richards so he can keep his promise, whatever it is...”

So Holly worked to keep the students alive, to keep Richards alive. And later they learned the Slytherin Firsts hadn’t eaten any of the Slytherin share of the food... When asked, the recovered Slytherins claimed they hadn’t noticed a difference in the taste of the food they ate. Most of them had lied; they’d known, just didn’t know what that meant or were too proud to admit something was wrong...

You should get some rest,” insisted Becky, who walked alongside Holly to the Memorial. “You can do this later...”

“No, I need to do it now,” insisted Holly. She needed to see for herself that Richards had woken up, was again able to keep his promise.

Richards had been among the sickest Slytherins. Perhaps it was because he had been plain greedy and eaten more of the tainted food but Holly had agonized over the thought that the severity was her own fault; she had stayed near Richards ever since he’d made that promise so had known Richards was extremely tired and stressed, had known he wasn’t feeling well but had said nothing. Perhaps, if Holly had insisted Richards get more rest he wouldn’t have gotten so sick... Looking back, Holly also blamed herself for not recognizing Richards or any of the Slytherins had food poisoning in the first place. After all, her own Grandfather had gotten food poisoning once and Holly had realized something was wrong with him way sooner—she should have known but had been too dense, too self-centered, too focused on her own problems to make the connection... If Richards had truly recovered, if they all did, then Holly’s part in the blame wouldn’t matter so much.

They reached the entrance to the Memorial. The door was open. Conner and Albus sat guarding the entry. “You’re tired too,” reminded Holly, “You should use this time to get some rest. I won’t do anything while Albus and Conner are near...” she assured Becky. Becky Smith was Holly’s best friend, but now she seemed little more than a jailor who clung to Holly’s side to make sure Holly didn’t do something drastic... Holly wouldn’t, especially not with Richards’ recovery but Becky and the rest of the Hufflepuffs still worried.

“And afterwards?” questioned Becky worriedly.

Holly rolled her eyes upwards and sighed. “Then I’ll ask Albus or Conner to come with me back to the Great Hall...” she promised. “Or I’ll just stay here and sleep in one of the empty beds...” Holly proposed. There were several now. Once, every bed had been filled with a Slytherin, each too ill to move. Now, they were mostly empty. “That would actually be the easiest,” Holly continued. “I am tired,” she admitted, “and it would save me having to walk back.” If Richards was truly on the mend, perhaps she could relax enough to sleep...

“O.K...” agreed Becky with reluctance. “I’ll see you later,” she promised.

“Of course,” agreed Holly. Becky turned and headed back to the Great Hall; Holly nodded a greeting to Albus and Conner and stepped inside.

**********

Anthony Richards saw Wycliff pass Potter and Fitzpatrick and enter the Memorial. Her loose blonde hair showed easily in the flickering torchlight. It looked straggly and disheveled. Wycliff moved quietly from one filled bed to another stopping briefly at each, leaning her head towards the person sitting in the chair next to the bed. When she finished visiting the other filled beds, Wycliff turned and headed towards Anthony. She looked pale and worn, older than he remembered. The flickering light revealed the deep black rims around her eyes that could only be caused by lack of sleep.

“Why don’t you take a break, Jha,” said Wycliff quietly. Jha—that would be Onella Jha. “I’ll
finish up your shift.” Jha nodded. She placed a scrap of paper in her book to hold its place, closed the book, stood and walked off. Wycliff sank down in the chair with obvious relief.

“Shift?” blurted Anthony. “A twenty-four hour watch?” he added. “I don’t need that!” The words kind of slipped out without thought. They weren’t at all what he had planned to say when he finally saw Wycliff.

“You did,” Wycliff replied coolly. She leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes.

“And only Firsts to watch?” questioned Anthony. He’d only seen Firsts so far and was guessing.

“They don’t know about last year,” Wycliff replied bluntly. “They actually want you to live…”

Anthony felt a flush of guilt. He didn’t regret their actions last year at all, not really… But now he knew about the animosity the actions had created… That part had lasted much longer than the actual actions and was proving difficult to ignore or overcome. “Yeah, we were a bit overboard last year,” he admitted aloud. It was as close to an apology as he’d ever give while still being honest. “But I seem to recall hearing your voice, too. Did you forget last year?”

“Never!” Wycliff said promptly with emotion. Then added, “but I want you to live, very much and flowery wishes weren’t working…” her voice trailed off. “How are you?” she asked changing the subject.


“Politer,” she answered briefly.

“Well, you can skip the manners, and the question,” Anthony told her. “What happens next?”

“Next, you get some sleep,” she told him in a dreamy voice.

“I’m not tired,” argued Anthony surprised Wycliff had made the suggestion. He didn’t feel tired at all. Weak yes, but not tired.

“Course you are,” she replied in that same dreamy voice. “Very tired.”

“No, I’m n—” Anthony broke off. It suddenly occurred to Anthony it was not him she was referring too… He looked at Wycliff. She was leaned back in the chair with her eyes closed… “Yes, sleep,” he told her. “You need it.” He pushed himself up in the bed. Then he grabbed the edge of the blanket and started pulling.

“What is it?” questioned Potter who had somehow materialized next to Anthony’s side. “Do you need to go to the loo?”

“No,” Anthony replied. “Put this over Wycliff,” he told Potter. “She needs some cover while she sleeps…”

“Then we should get her in a bed,” Potter suggested.

“No,” answered Anthony. “She’s covering Jha’s shift. You’d have to find someone else to cover for Jha if you put Wycliff in the bed… Let her sleep where she is; she needs it and I’ll be fine.”

So Potter helped Anthony drape the blanket over Wycliff tucking it in at the sides. Then Potter vanished from sight briefly and returned bringing a second blanket which he unfolded over Anthony. Anthony leaned back in bed—now he was tired. But he felt better. It would never do if Wycliff died keeping him alive…

**********
Chapter 15

Dear Grandmum,

Today has been very relaxing; I got to sleep in and take a walk, but now I must get ready for class…

**********

Mrs. Paige Brenna Crowley gave her brooch (Solomon’s knot) one final adjustment before she slipped the emerald green robe over her shoulders. She lifted the bag on the floor and stepped outside. Knockturn Alley first, plastered over with faces and reward poster and its hooded parents, still desperate for any word… Then she turned onto Diagon Alley, still empty of witches and wizards…

Paige again stepped into the cheezy curio shop at the end of the alley. Boot stood immediately upon her arrival. There was a worried expression on his face. “Yes, ma’am?” he questioned. “How may I help you?”

“I’m returning these!” Paige said imperiously. She swung the unopened bag she carried onto the counter.

“I don’t understand,” stated Boot. “Was there something wrong?”

“Of course!” Paige assured him though in truth, she had never opened the bag of scrolls she had received from Boot so she had absolutely no idea what the scrolls even looked like… “No one bought them!” she complained. “They’re un-sellable!” she told him in a scandalized voice. Of course, she had never placed them on the shelves; that would have been tacky making her as unscrupulous as the Knockturn charlatans selling hope while profiting off the pain of others… “I have no space in my shop for this kind of trash!” Boot’s worried expression lightened considerably, no doubt with relief.

The near-black Healthstones had lightened in colour two days after Paige had visited Boot. The rest had lightened as well. The Slytherin parents had held each other and wept with relief. The Healthstones continued to gradually lighten in colour throughout the week, the worst becoming pale purple. The colour of those had faded into shimmery opalescence just the previous day and had retained that colour for a full 24 hours! Crisis averted. There would be no grief enraged attacks—today. The Ministry deserved an update…

“I shall expect a full refund,” Paige told Boot. There had been no bill and no payment but there were ears everywhere; this had to appear a usual business meeting.

“Of course,” Boot agreed respectfully. “I’m sorry my goods were unacceptable,” he continued in a regretful voice, “but it occurs to me that perhaps this type of message scroll is unnecessary in any shop, wizard children being usually robust in health…”

“They are,” agreed Paige, in effect confirming the Healthstones now reflected healthy children. “Good-bye.”

Paige swept out of the shop without waiting for a response. She had a family dinner to attend, a celebration of Anthony’s recovery. It was unfortunate he wasn’t there in person to experience it.

**********

Dear Grandmum,

School has been keeping me really busy. I’m learning so many new things…

**********

Anthony Richards stepped slowly into the Great Hall. It was his first visit since he had fallen ill. Slytherin First Taj Mallick walked alongside Anthony in case he needed the support. It was slow
going but so far, Anthony had managed on his own. Anthony took another step into the hall, and another heading towards the Slytherin table. At some point Anthony became aware that the general hum of noise had died down. He was tempted to look up and see the cause, but didn’t, afraid the action would cause him to lose his balance… The Hall grew more quiet with every step Anthony took until all that could be heard was the sound of his feet shuffling steadily forward.

“They’re looking at us!” Mallick whispered excitedly in Anthony’s ear.

Anthony nodded. He had guessed as much. He had always envisioned the day when his mere presence could turn the head of every student at Hogwarts, but had expected it to be for something other than managing to leave the infirmary. That wasn’t so bad; recognition was recognition, but Anthony had always thought it would be a day when he was standing straight and tall, able to look and greet his admirers not stooped, barely able to keep his balance.

Step by step Anthony continued down the center aisle... He never realized how long that aisle was or how self-conscious he’d feel knowing everyone was looking at him. Why were they looking? Were they pleased? Angry? Was his hair in place? Were his clothes straight? He wanted to look back at those looking at him to gauge their expressions, but what if he stumbled and fell with everyone looking… Up ahead was the Slytherin table. Soon he could sit, could look around at those staring at him.

Anthony continued step-by-step focusing all his attention on staying upright and moving. After what seemed an eternity, Anthony could see the Slytherin table just up ahead. He veered in its direction. The bench looked full but Anthony knew they’d move over and make room for him. Just a few more steps and then he could sit and look about.

“No!” hissed Mallick. “Up there!”

The stage? Seriously? Could he do it? Should he? It was Mallick telling him; he was a First and the Firsts had not led him astray… Anthony changed directions and slowly headed to the end of the hall. One step, another step, and another…

A sudden sharp “crack” sounded between steps and echoed throughout the Hall. Anthony paused. What was it? Dare he look about for the cause? He decided against it, his weary legs were already threatening to give out. He took another step forward. Another “crack” sounded. And then another! Clapping? Applause?? Yes! That’s definitely what it was. Not a lot, not everyone, but definitely applause. The clapping continued as Anthony reached the steps. He lifted one foot up. A hand from above reached down, grabbed an elbow and supported Anthony removing the weight from his legs enabling him to continue up.

“Congratulations,” whispered Corner in Anthony’s ear. “It would seem you’re still in charge…” Corner kept a tight hold of Anthony’s elbow, supporting him as he stepped to an empty chair at the table on the stage.

“This means nothing!” hissed O’Daniels as Anthony neared.

“They’re just glad you’re not sick any more!” added Finnegan while Anthony passed.

“Don’t get sick again!” advised Corner from the other side.

Anthony heartily agreed with that piece of advice. He hated feeling so weak and helpless. Corner pulled out the chair and guided Anthony into it. Anthony closed his eyes and leaned back in relief. He had assured Wycliff he was ready and could do it on his own, and had actually made it! But the effort was much more than he had expected.

“All the Firsts, ‘bout half the Slytherins, some of the older students from the other houses…” murmured Basu in Anthony’s ear. She knew it was important to note such things, who supported him; who didn’t, especially if Anthony wanted to remain in charge…

Anthony opened his eyes and looked about. The prefects at the table looked back at him expectantly. “Uh…”

Woods slid a piece of paper under Anthony’s nose. He looked at it. The heading read:

AGENDA

His eyes rapidly found the first item listed. “Pollination” he read aloud.

“Fruit tree pollination has been very successful,” stated Moore professionally. “Almost every blossom produces fruit. About 30% of the vegetables are producing fruit. We’re still testing
pollination designs… Cat whiskers seem to work the best but we need more whiskers than we have
cats. Wycliff is working with the Ravenclaws to modify a hair-growing hex she knows so it will
work on cats... Even so, we currently have enough fresh produce of some sort to ensure everyone
will have food should the kitchen not refresh tomorrow…”

“Uh, good job,” said Anthony. He looked again at the Agenda. “Education?”

“Firsts, Seconds and Thirds are progressing well in defensive spells and potions,” reported
Huckaby. “Malfoy has agreed to talk about dark magic detection, during tomorrow’s classes,” she
continued. “It’s directed towards the younger students but anyone is welcome to attend. The
Weasleys have agreed to give Charms lessons starting with making moths… Potter has a group
making brooms and has promised to give flying lessons to every student who completes a broom.
Shipman and some of her friends are making an obstacle course for the students to run once they
learn the basics. The Breysburrys are teaching Transfiguration; they are showing the students how to
make insect shaped bits of meat to feed the toads.”

“Toads?” questioned Anthony in confusion.

insects here!” she reminded Anthony. “Cept Breysbury’s spider. The cats can eat scraps but the
forty-eight pet toads; they were starving! It turns out they don’t mind eating tainted food, but it has to
look right, i.e. like moving insects. The Third and Fourth year students are making mice for the
owls… We need to set up classes to study for the O.W.L.S. for the fifth year students” she
continued. “We’re going to get out of here and they need the full year to study properly. I understand
several Slytherins retook the test,” she added. “It occurs to me that they are perhaps better versed and
best able to teach the requirements of the test... Would you know of anyone willing to conduct
O.W.L.S. lessons?” she finished looking directly at Anthony.

“I can poll the Slytherins to see who scored the highest,” offered Gruffudd.

“Thank you,” said Anthony while looking at Gruffudd. “Let us know what you find out at the
next meeting.” It would be interesting to learn which names he would suggest. Anthony looked
down again at the Agenda. “Food production?” he asked.

“I cannot coax the plants in Hagrid’s garden into further growth,” Basu reported. “They are
frozen in mid-growth.”

Anthony nodded. He was expecting that. Their earlier reports seemed to indicate that nothing
outside changed or grew from day to day. Pity. The produce from Hagrid’s garden would have
greatly augmented their food supplies…

“However, I successfully got the scurvy grass and knotgrass from the Potions supplies to
sprout,” she continued. “I transplanted the seedlings to the ground beneath the fruit trees; the breeze
created from the pollinating moths seems to be enough to pollinate the grains. We have already
harvested one batch of grain but what we got isn’t near enough for a loaf of bread let alone provide
for the school. We need more space for the grains,” Basu added. “I propose covering the quidditch
pitch with a layer of dirt so we can plant our grain there.”

“You can’t do that,” argued O’Daniels. “We’re making brooms! We’re going to hold a
quidditch match!”

“In your dreams!” stated Basu with disdain. “You haven’t quaffles, snitches or anything.
Scurvy grass seeds are tiny! We need a lot! In addition, the blades of grass can be used to make
salads mixed with the dandelion greens. We need both the starch and greens to supplement our diet.”

“So use the lawn area!” suggested Finnegan. “If you plant grass in the pitch you’ll cover it
over with a net like you did to Cuddles pen!”

“We did that,” corrected Moore. “It keeps the pollinating moths in and makes them easier to
control.”

“Doesn’t matter who did it,” continued O’Daniels dismissively, “the end results is a pitch we
can’t use for Quidditch! Put your grass somewhere else!” he demanded.

“The lawn is unacceptable,” informed Basu. “It is broken up by numerous areas that will reset.
We need a large flat area that we can control for harvesting purposes!”

“And where will we practice and play if you have the area taken over for growing and
“You can use the lawn area,” Basu decided aloud.
“That’s not enough space,” protested O’Daniels. "Besides, where would anyone sit to watch?"
"Why are you worrying about Quidditch?" put in Gruffudd. “This isn’t Hogwarts! We should be spending our time getting out, not playing games!”
“And what do we do with our free time until then?” countered Wrezenski. “We’ve got to have something to look forward to during our down time.”
“Sleep!” suggested Gruffudd. Gruffudd had been released from the infirmary only a day ago. Anthony was positive Gruffudd still felt fairly weak; he certainly did…
“That works for you sickos,” stated Finnegan bluntly, “but the rest of us aren’t so slothful! We’ve been working night and day to keep you alive, without a word of thanks, I might add, and now that you’re back on your feet, we need a break! Grass is grass,” she added. “Scurvy grass is a common weed! Why should you inconvenience the rest of us by taking over the pitch when you can plant and grow that stuff anywhere?”
“And harvest stem-by-stem, one at a time?!” counter Basu. “We’ll be old and gray before we get enough to eat that way!”
“We should all maintain peak physical fitness so we’re ready to take down the kidnappers when they come,” added O’Daniels. “Quidditch will improve our balance and our reflexes.”
“Only for those playing,” countered Basu. “There’s no bludger or snitch!” she repeated. “You’re wasting your time, energy and valuable space if you prevent us from using the pitch for something productive!”
“But keeping up morale is important also,” reminded Woods. “We’ve all been working hard and deserve a chance to relax.”
“What do you say Richards?” asked Corner.
Anthony looked at Corner and then around the table at the rest of the prefects. They all seemed to be watching him closely. Anthony suddenly had a flash that this was one of those times he had better make the “right” decision or loose everything!
“We need to focus on food,” Anthony began slowly. “Without it we won’t survive and bread would be nice…” Basu leaned back with obvious satisfaction, “but exercise and morale is important too…” He looked at Corner. “Do you think the Ravenclaws could design something that would work as a snitch?”
Corner leaned back and closed his eyes in thought. “Possibly…”
“Toady!” muttered Gruffudd.
Anthony started at the word. Yes, it did look like he was currying up to popular opinion to keep his position. Perhaps he was. Perhaps there was another way to resolve the situation…
“Actually, I was thinking we could do both…” he said aloud. “If I understand things correctly, the grains need a breeze to pollinate.” Basu nodded. “Does it have to be moths?” Anthony asked. “Why don’t we use the breeze created from quidditch practice to pollinate…”
“That could work,” stated Basu thoughtfully. “We can always use the moths in between time… But there will never be a game.”
“If we can make a snitch, perhaps we can make bludgers and quaffles too…” offered Moore.
“Excellent! Tell the students to begin work immediately transferring dirt to cover the pitch—how deep?” he asked turning to Basu.
“Ten, no twenty centimeters,” she answered promptly. “That will accommodate some of the tubers as well.”
“And when the grass is planted and growing, I propose we hold a Quidditch game to celebrate. Would you be willing to organize a game, Finnegan?”
“Um yes,” agreed Finnegan reluctantly.
“Terrific! Now that that’s settled, um,” Anthony coughed and cleared his throat. “On behalf of all the Slytherins, I would like to thank the rest of you for your efforts in helping us recover from our, uh, difficulties…” Paige had said “please” and “thank-you” were words valued by the other houses and cost nothing to say. Now seemed an appropriate time to test her words. A prompt apology had a
favorable response from both McGonagall and Thomas; perhaps a prompt “thank-you” could do something similar. If it worked, the Slytherins would all owe him…

Anthony looked down at the agenda. The words seemed to blur in front of him. “Ah, I think that’s enough for now,” he told the group. “Why don’t we wait with the rest of this until tomorrow,” he suggested. Corner nodded and stood breaking the Muffliato spell. The rest stood as well. Corner lent a hand supporting Anthony’s elbow helping Anthony to stand and then down the stairs. Looking up Anthony saw Wycliff, Pilkington, Fitzpatrick and Scorpius waiting for him at the base of the stairs. “An advisory meeting?” he asked in dismay, not certain he could manage one.

“Yeah,” answered Fitzpatrick. “Wycliff says you’re tired. We advise you to get some rest!”

“Malfey has fixed up a bed for you,” Pilkington added. “He’ll show you where…”

“A bed?” questioned Anthony in surprise. “I thought they were all raffled off!”

“They were,” agreed Wycliff. “But not the Infirmary ones… Don’t want you to have a relapse,” she added.

“The Slytherin beds are all down in the dungeon past the Potions Room,” Scorpius added. “We’ve decided we want a bit of privacy. I’ll show you where we set up the beds…”

The four helped Anthony down to the dungeons, stopping at the potions room. A huge sign that read “Slytherins only!” blocked the corridor after the potions room. Scorpius led Anthony past the sign. They turned the corner, and walked further down a corridor lined with beds. Scorpius stopped at one neatly made up with blankets and a pillow. Anthony gratefully lay down in the bed, pulled the blanket over his shoulders and went to sleep.

**********
Dear Grandmum,

This school is very large. It has 142 staircases! At least that’s what they tell me. Can you believe it? 142! I have only found 78 so far...

**********

“Are there any other questions?” asked Prefect Lynette Huckaby. She looked around the room crowded with first, second and third year students. Seeing none, she added, “Then let’s all thank Mr. Malfoy for his very informative speech on Dark Magic Detection.” The younger students dutifully clapped their hands. “That’s it for today,” she told them. “Remember, if you see something suspicious, don’t touch it, but report it to Mr. Malfoy immediately. In the meantime, read the rest of Chapter 3 for tomorrow and be prepared for questions.” All the students started picking up their things and rose to leave. The room rapidly emptied. “Thanks for speaking,” Huckaby told Scorpius Malfoy. “Perhaps you can come again?” she asked hopefully.

“Yeah, maybe,” agreed Scorpius without enthusiasm. Talking to a bunch of First through Thirds was not his idea of a good time, but there wasn’t much else going on. Besides, “teaching” got him out of doing other, more objectionable stuff, like digging dirt.

“That’d be great!” she said happily. “I’ve got to go see to the food,” she added. “See you later.” Huckaby took off.

“Nice speech,” came a new voice.

Scorpius looked up into the green eyes of Albus Potter leaning casually against the back wall of the classroom. How had Potter gotten there? Scorpius was certain Potter hadn’t been there during his speech. “Yeah,” agreed Scorpius but he knew it was a lie. He’d given had been a rather lackluster speech capable of putting everyone to sleep. He had no samples to show and no spells to teach. He couldn’t even talk about the real dark magical items he’d handled because that was family business. Besides, none of that mattered here. “What do you want?” Scorpius questioned.

Potter straightened pulling himself off the wall. “You really spend the summer identifying and disarming dark items?” he questioned.

“Yeah,” affirmed Scorpius. “What of it?”

“Can you do the Imperius Curse?”

“That’s unforgivable!” replied Scorpius promptly.

“I know,” replied Potter. “Can you do it?”

“You do know what “unforgivable” means,” don’t you?” questioned Scorpius sarcastically.

“An instant trip to Azkaban!”

“Have to get there first,” replied Potter bluntly. “And if we could do that, I wouldn’t be asking. Can you do it?”

“Why?”

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Prefect Manasa Basu gave one last look at her plants. The new tomatoes and cucumbers were growing nicely. The Forever Grow fertilizer induced fast growth but the plants also tended to age and die quickly. That meant Manasa had to constantly sprout and grow replacements. Manasa had carefully diluted the fertilizer and added an infusion of other herbs to reduce the acceleration of plant growth to a manageable speed. The plants would be ready to flower and pollinate in the morning.

The garden spells Manasa’s grandmother had taught her back in India enabled Manasa to circumvent the no-growth spells of the Potions Room the previous year and made it possible for her to coax growth out of even more seeds and some roots that proved eatable this year. Manasa never
imagined those stodgy old spells would become so useful.

Of course, the seeds in this place weren’t protected by the no-growth spells found at Hogwarts. Manasa realized that the first time she tried to sprout something. The seeds were still reluctant to grow and the simple growing spells usually taught in school would not work. Manasa never informed anyone else about her seed observations. It wouldn’t do for the other students to think her abilities weren’t necessary for plant production.

Manasa had jumped at the opportunity to further her career by assisting Richards thwart O’Shea. Hers was a doomed plan anyway and by helping Richards, Manasa could now add the prestigious position of Hogwarts Prefect to her resume. It mattered not on a resume how many days she served as Prefect, only that she had.

Manasa worked hard to remain prefect, by trying to make herself indispensable. At first she did it because she saw the malevolent looks O’Shea gave her causing Manasa to believe O’Shea would happily retake her position at a moment’s notice. Then Manasa did it because she saw the power and prestige that came with her work. She had once been just a lowly transfer student from India and now, everyone looked up to her; she was second only to Richards in importance.

Manasa drew her wand and stepped towards the greenhouse door. “Lumos!” she said lighting her wand. Then she extinguished the torch that lit the Greenhouse. Holding her wand up for light with one hand she opened the door with the other. Manasa stepped outside and then turned to close and lock the door behind her.

“Stupify!”

**********

Anthony looked at himself critically in the mirror. Appearances were important. He gave his hair one last hasty brush, double-checked his teeth and re-straightened his robes again before leaving the Girls’ bathroom at exactly 6:29 am. Boys could use the bathroom from the hour to half hour; girls could use it from the half hour to the hour… Anthony liked to time his visit at the tail end of the boys’ time to insure none of the girls tried to slip in early. Also, some of the prefects complained that the boys were “slow” to leave meaning they stayed past the agreed half hour mark… Anthony’s presence insured that didn’t happen at whatever bathroom he used. No one really wanted to post guards at the bathrooms.

“About time!” snorted Ivy Malfoy waiting impatiently outside.
“I’m not late,” stated Anthony firmly.
“I’ve been looking for you,” she stated.
“Oh?”
“Yeah, you said if any First tried to bother us to inform you personally and you’d take care of it.”
“Oh?”
“Yeah, I passed one as I left the dorm this morning,” she exclaimed. “He’s annoying. I think you should talk to him.”
“Thanks.” Breakfast would have to wait. Anthony headed back down the stairs to the entrance of their “dorm.”

“So where is she!” demanded an upset sounding voice. Anthony recognized the speaker as Hufflepuff First, Oliver Febland.
“What’s going on?” Anthony asked while walking up.
“I’m trying to find Memsahib Basu!” said Febland.
Memsahib—Basu said it meant “Miss” in Indian and insisted that word be used instead of the traditional English “Miss.” Pilkington told Anthony it was actually a term the Indians used to refer to the English women, Miss or Mrs., in India during Colonial times.
“Why?” questioned Anthony.
“Because we were supposed to pollinate her new plants this morning and she wasn’t there!”
“Wasn’t where?” A cold knot started to form in Anthony’s stomach.
“Wasn’t in the greenhouse,” answered Febland.
“And she was supposed to be?”
“Yes! But she wasn’t. That’s why I’m asking if she’s still here,” explained Febland.
“Is she?” asked Anthony turning his attention to the morning watch Derrik Groarke. (S7)
“How would I know?” stated Groarke with annoyance. “I just came on duty!”
“Did you look?”
“Course not! I’m on watch; I’m not supposed to leave my station!” he answered righteously.
Anthony mentally rolled his eyes. “Wait here,” he told Febland and stepped past Groarke into their dorm.

**********

There was no sign of Basu within the dorms. It also seemed that she may not have come in the night before; at least no one on “watch” remembered seeing Basu do so. In fact, the last time anyone in the dorm remembered seeing Basu was in the Great Hall at dinner last night... No, that wasn’t right. Febland had seen her—right after dinner. She told him to meet her in the greenhouse in the morning to do some pollinating and then went out of the Great Hall.

That cold knot in Anthony Richards’ stomach had grown and turned to ice.

Why was it so easy to forget they were all kidnap victims and an unknown kidnapper was still on the prowl? Basu had been alone! That should have never happened. Only Basu knew what she did to make the plants grow. Without her their very survival was in jeopardy. And the watch was sloppy! They should keep track of who comes in and out and when! And the Prefects should make a head count every night to make sure no one is missing and someone should be watching out for all the prefects too! They had been lazy! Their inefficiency may have doomed them all!

Anthony headed out to the Greenhouse with Febland to confirm Basu wasn’t there before sounding an alarm. None of the Slytherins seemed overly worried that Basu hadn’t made an appearance and thought Febland was making too big a deal of her absence. Grufudd was certain that Febland got the time wrong. Warrington thought Basu kept a change of clothes in the greenhouse and often slept with her plants; she probably stepped out of sight when Febland arrived rather than let him see her in her sleeping clothes. Ogg thought Basu always did morning prayers somewhere… O’Shea thought Basu was probably in one of the upstairs bathrooms primping where she would be less likely to be interrupted by boys if she went overtime...

Anthony reached Greenhouse 1 and stepped inside. The building was filled with plants. The tables and benches had been moved outside to make room for several rows of potted plants. One table, the one that would have been used by the professor, remained in back. It had potted plants on it. The counters that lined the walls were covered with trays of seedlings. Bags of Forever Grow Fertilizer were stored under the counters. The bags had been removed from Greenhouse 3 and stacked in Greenhouse 1 every time the kitchen refreshed. There was also a large pile of empty fertilizer bags, flattened to take less space, stuffed under the counters; nothing was thrown away—it might have a use later.

“Tell me what you were supposed to do this morning,” Anthony asked Febland as he wandered about the greenhouse.

“I’d been working with the Weasleys to make a new moth,” Febland began, “one that would pollinate the tiny tubular flowers. See?” he proudly held out a jar filled with moth constructs. Up close they looked pretty disgusting—fluttery white wings attached to bits of meat scraps with thin white hairs of varying lengths poking out beneath the “bodies.” “We’re trying cat hairs as pollinators,” he told Anthony proudly. “We ran out of paint-brush hairs ages ago and the Gemino moths just don’t work that well…”

“And this morning?”
“Memsahib Basu said she’d have some plants ready to pollinate that we could try them on.”
“Does she?” asked Anthony.
“Yes, these,” answered Febland pointing to some medium sized plants on a table in the back
of the greenhouse. They weren’t there yesterday when I was here to check flower bell lengths.”

“Flower bell lengths?”

“You know, so we could get make the hairs long enough…”

“Oh.” That sounded so tedious. Anthony was glad he wasn’t involved in making pollinating moths. “Does anything look out of place or different?” Anthony asked.

Febland walked around the Greenhouse with a frown of concentration on his face. “No,” he finally answered. “But maybe that fertilizer bag didn’t used to be there…” Febland pointed to an opened 25kg bag of Forever Grow Fertilizer leaned up against the other unopened bags. “I usually see the opened bags near the back table where she can get to it easier…” Febland added explaining.

Anthony looked at the opened bag. The mint green bag with moss coloured lettering that was covered with moving images of growing ivy and shamrocks didn’t look out of place despite the different location. It leaned against six unopened green bags that had been laid flat, stacked one on top of each other under the counters. There were several stacks of six making a solid wall of fertilizer at least three meters in length under the counter. The ends of the stacks were flush with the edge of the counter. But they didn’t have to be. As Anthony eyeballed the opened bag, he realized the bags were actually shorter than the countertop width.

Not knowing exactly why he did it, Anthony walked over to the opened bag of fertilizer. He grabbed it by the ends and dragged it away from the stacks. Behind, in the space between the fertilizer bags and the wall Anthony spied the soles of two slippers—the kind Basu usually wore! Anthony reached down and took hold of the slipper. It was attached to a foot!

“Help me move these bags out,” Anthony instructed while drawing out his wand.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” Anthony said firmly while pointing his wand at the stack of fertilizer. Febland easily shifted the whole stack away from the counter. They could both see the ankles and knees of what had to be Basu! “Wingardium Leviosa!” shouted Anthony again at the next stack and the stack beyond it. Soon he could see all of Basu lying on her side with her back against the wall, eyes open and arms stiffly at her sides. Strands of black hair covered her face.

“Is she dead!” asked Febland worriedly as he looked over Anthony’s shoulder.

“No,” answered Anthony recognizing the spell. He pointed his wand at Basu and said, “Finite Incantatem!”

Immediately Basu’s stiff body went limp and she rolled forward face down on the floor. “Go get Wycliff,” Anthony instructed Febland. The boy nodded and left the greenhouse at a run.

“I’m fine!” stated Basu as she lifted her elbows and planted her hands on the ground lifting her face and upper body up.

“Hopefully,” agreed Anthony, “but we should make sure.”

“Wycliff knows nothing about me!” stated Basu proudly. “It is a waste of time!”

“Perhaps,” agreed Anthony realizing Basu probably practiced Occlumency, “but she is the only healer we have. Who did this?”

“I don’t know! All I heard was “Stupify!” and that was in a whisper.” Basu drew herself into a seated position. “When I awoke,” she continued while brushing the dirt off her clothes, “I was behind the bags of fertilizer, unable to move. Wycliff is a charlatan and hack who guesses well and depends on the Potter name for her reputation,” she added as she smoothed her hair back into place.

“You don’t think she saved our lives?” questioned Anthony curiously.

“Any Muggle can determine a fever!” she said disdainfully. “Wycliff didn’t make the potions or set up the infirmary yet she got all the credit! Did you know she took ill too and got a private room to recover in?”

“No, I didn’t,” admitted Anthony. Wycliff hadn’t been sick, not from the meat and not when he had last seen her before passing out. The only way she would have taken “ill” after that was to have been if she had taken on the symptoms of those around her. That could happen if she were unblocked. He had read up on Empaths after his first year. But Wycliff knew how to block; why was she unblocked?

“Well she did,” confirmed Basu, “in the Room of Requirement no less. And Corner attended
to her personally!” she added with disgust. “Why does everyone pamper her so?”

“They didn’t,” thought Anthony promptly. Removing an unblocked Empath from the influence of other sick people was the only way to insure her recovery. Corner was probably there to make sure she didn’t try to commit suicide again... Strange how none of the other Slytherins had picked up on that...

“My wand!” Basu exclaimed suddenly. “Where’s my wand?” Basu quickly crawled out from under the counter as she spoke and started searching the grounds on her hands and knees.

“Where was it?” asked Anthony with a sinking feeling.

“I was just outside the greenhouse,” she related while getting to her knees, “When I heard a sound. I drew my wand and then I heard the Stupefy. It must be outside!” she concluded. She pointed her wand hand at the entryway. “Accio wand!” she shouted. Nothing happened. “It’s got to be outside!” she insisted. “Help me up!” Basu ordered. “I must get closer!”

Anthony extended a hand, took hold of Basu’s elbow, and helped her stand. He hung on steadying her as she moved to the Greenhouse door. “Accio wand!” Basu shouted again as she extended her wand arm.

“No need,” said Anthony as he spied two more twigs amidst the broken rubble of the entryway. He let go of Basu and picked the twigs up—Basu’s wand. It had been broken in two.

“No!” Basu moaned. “I am lost without my wand!”

Anthony stared blankly at the pieces. Who would do such a thing? But he already knew the answer. The kidnappers!

“What happened?” came the voice of Wycliff.

Anthony looked in the direction of the voice and saw Febland with Wycliff and Corner hurrying towards them.

“Petrificus Totalus,” answered Anthony briskly. “False alarm. She’s fine.”

“For how long?” persisted Wycliff.

“All night,” Basu admitted.

“Then you’ll have major muscle strain,” said Wycliff in a professional tone. “Bed-rest for at least a day,” she ordered.

“Did you see who did it?” questioned Corner.

“No.”

“There’s more,” added Anthony. He held up the pieces of wand in his hand. Further explanation was unnecessary.

“I have failed,” moaned Basu. “I cannot be prefect without my wand…”

Wycliff took the pieces and turned them thoughtfully over in her hands. “No,” said Wycliff slowly. “You are already prefect. The knowledge is there with or without the wand.”

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“The recent attack on prefect Basu has highlighted the need to increase our security,” stated Anthony Richards at the mid-morning prefect meeting Anthony had called once Basu had been safely situated in a bed for mandatory bed rest. Wycliff had threatened to enter the Slytherin dorm to make sure she stayed there until Anthony got Corwin to agree to stay with Basu.

“Basu can’t remain prefect,” protested Gruffudd. “She has no wand!”

“There is nothing in the Hogwarts guidelines for prefect selection that says a prefect must have a wand of her own,” retorted Anthony calmly. Corner just happened to have a copy of the guidelines and had promptly lent it to Anthony to review. Anthony knew Wycliff had an extra wand that could be lent to Basu but Basu would be too proud to borrow a wand if Anthony could have gotten Wycliff to agree...

“It’s a no brainer!” retorted Gruffudd. “Hogwarts is a magic school! Of course the prefects must have a wand! You need to reinstate O’Shea!”

“Being a prefect is more than mere possession of a wand,” answered Anthony. “It’s responsibility, and judgment too. Basu has not failed in those areas. She should not be punished
because her successes have made her a prime target for the kidnappers. If she is replaced solely because she has lost her wand then none of us are safe. All the kidnappers would have to do to create total chaos between us would be to break our wands! We must not let the kidnappers win in this. We must stand strong together with or without wands.” Gruffudd was not pleased, but Anthony could almost see the rest of the prefects breathe a sigh of relief at his response.

“This was also clearly an attempt to destroy our food supply,” Anthony continued. “We cannot let the kidnappers win in anything! Accordingly, prefect Basu has agreed to become our Herbology professor and teach her plant crafts to the other students.” It had taken all three, Anthony, Wycliff and Corner to convince Basu to agree to teach Herbology especially without a wand. It took even more effort to get her to agree to share her gardening secrets. But doing so was a matter of both safety and security. Sharing the knowledge would protect Basu from further attacks and continue the school food supply no matter what.

“In the meantime, we shall have to be more security conscious. The attack on Basu cannot be repeated. The kidnappers cannot be permitted to pick us off one by one due to our own carelessness. We need to take better care of each other. Pass the word that no student, including prefects, may travel alone; all students need to check in and out of their dorms and there shall be a 10:00pm curfew.”

“And if the students refuse to travel in groups or are out after the curfew?” questioned Grufudd.

“It is your responsibility as prefect to insure your students travel together and check in by 10:00,” answered Anthony.

“And if they still don’t?” asked Huckaby.

“Then we assume something is wrong. If one of your students turns up missing we need to start a full search,” replied Anthony, “immediately! Time is of the essence,” he added. “We were very lucky prefect Basu was not injured and only lost a wand; we may not be so fortunate if the kidnapper attacks another student.”

“What if it’s a prefect that’s still out after 10:00?” questioned O’Daniels.

“As prefects, you are at more risk than the other students,” replied Anthony uncomfortably aware that he was as much or even a larger target than the prefects. “If you don’t check in then the watch should send word to Corner and myself immediately so we can initiate a full search.”

“And if you are the one missing?” questioned Moore.

“Search faster.”
Chapter 17

“We’re holding an advisor meeting in the Room of Requirement in ten minutes. You’re free to come, if you can…”

The ink on the paper vanished. Anthony crumpled the message angrily and tossed it on the floor. How dare they have an Advisor meeting without him! Who did they think they were advising? And that second part! That was just insulting! “Come on!” he told Scorpius. “We’ve got to go going!”

“Where?” asked Scorpius hastily getting up from the table. They were just finishing their breakfast.

“I’ll tell you on the way!” Anthony stood and managed to knock over his mug of water in the process. “Damn!” he said to himself. “Not again!” Anthony hastily used his robe to wipe the area dry before stepping away from the table. That’s when he accidently stepped on the hem of his robes ripping them…

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“What do you think you’re doing holding a meeting without me!” exclaimed Anthony Richards when he finally reached the Room of Requirement.

“Waiting for you!” replied Fitzpatrick.

Anthony blinked in surprise. Fitzpatrick was holding his wand aimed directly at him! As did Pilkington, and … Potter?! What was Potter doing here? The door behind him slammed shut. Anthony wheeled around and saw Wycliff blocking the door! “What’s going on?”

“We want your wands!” stated Fitzpatrick coldly. “Now!”

“Never!” stated Scorpius defensively. Anthony nodded and instinctively moved closer to Scorpius.

“Lighten up!” stated Pilkington. She used her wand arm to lower both Fitzpatrick and Potter’s wands. “This isn’t an ambush, not exactly. It is serious though, and we do need your wands over there,” she pointed to the table with her wand, “just in case.”

“In case of what?” asked Anthony not moving.

“In case we guessed wrong, or right.”

“What?”

“You’ve been having some accidents lately,” Pilkington began.

“So!” asked Anthony defensively. “I’ve just been having an off day.”

“Off week, more likely!” stated Pilkington bluntly. “You’ve been stumbling and bumping into things for the past four days!”

“It’s a relapse!” Anthony declared. “I’ve been working too hard.”

“Holly says you’re physically fine!” declared Pilkington. “Outside of all the bumps and bruises you’ve been collecting…”

“So we’re thinking something else is the source of your … difficulties.”

“Nah, you’re just clumsy!” stated Fitzpatrick nastily.

Anthony gulped. That’s why Potter was there, Potter, the nutter and clutz! Only being a clutz wasn’t really all his fault… “You think it’s all due to a spell?” Anthony asked aloud.

“Something like that,” answered Wycliff.

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“Much more satisfying this way,” answered Fitzpatrick. “Especially since we have to remove it! Would love to sit back and watch you fall flat on your back every day,” he added cheerfully, “we all would, but Holly says it’s bad for morale.”

“And you’re getting frustrated,” added Wycliff.

“Frustrated people tend to make bad decisions,” stated Pilkington.
“Lost any hair recently?” asked Potter abruptly.
“Huh? Of course not!”
“Sure?” persisted Potter. “That’s how Crowley got me! Turn around! Show us!”
“Crowley never,” began Anthony defensively.
“I know what I know,” stated Potter firmly. “It was still Crowley even though Umbridge was pulling the strings… Crowley’s just lucky Holly cleared her name!”
“She had? Paige and Tom never mentioned that.”
“Now, turn around and show us your hair!”
“Nope,” put in Fitzpatrick while raising his wand warningly. “Wands first! Don’t want you to “accidentally” set off a spell!”
“…or maybe trip and break your wand!” added Wycliff.
Anthony slowly drew out his wand by the point end, and carefully placed it on the table. Accident spells could be disastrous when holding a wand.
“You too!” stated Fitzpatrick firmly when Scorpius made no move to take out his wand.
“I’m not stumbling,” he stated while shaking his head.
“You’re with Richards most of the time due to the new rules,” stated Pilkington. “You might be a trigger of some sort… We need to check you too.”
“Do it!” said Anthony with resignation. “There’s logic to what she says…”
“Don’t touch it,” Scorpius warned as he set his wand on the table.
“Wouldn’t dream of it,” said Fitzpatrick with a shutter. He pocketed his wand. “Now, turn around, both of you.”
Anthony turned slowly about while feeling distinctly naked without his wand.
“Ruffle up your hair,” said Potter from right behind him. “If it’s been cut, it should show…”
“Of course it’s been cut!” protested Anthony. Everyone’s hair had been cut! A five centimeter lock of hair had been cut from everyone’s head that first week after someone realized that casting a gemino spell on paintbrushes left them with a bunch of useless legless moths when the gemino spell wore off. Getting hair from everyone insured no one could claim the resulting produce was exclusively theirs.
“We have that hair,” informed Potter. “We checked it first,” he told them. "Rose and Hugo stashed the hair we officially collected for pollination purposes in a bag that is placed under several security spells when not in use, the kind used at her uncle’s shop. There’s also a Burn Curse on the bag—the contents will burn up should anyone but Rose or Hugo try to get into the bag. That bag has not been disturbed. Has any more hair been cut?”
“What if it has?” questioned Anthony while he ruffled his already short hair. He knew it hadn’t been cut but vaguely remembered a day when they had jumped Potter and shaved an “S” on his head. Paige had not been involved but she had been in the shadows at the time. Had she collected the hair for later use? Anthony didn’t remember.
“Then we’ll know what we’re dealing with,” answered Pilkington. “We’ll be able to develop a counter spell…”
“I don’t see anything,” stated Potter. “Do you?”
“No,” answered Wycliff. The sound of her voice indicated she was just behind him too. “What about Malfoy?” Scorpius obligingly turned and ruffled up his longer hair. “Nothing either,” Wycliff said after a moment.
“Right!” said Fitzpatrick cheerfully. “That means you’ll have to strip!”
“What!” exclaimed Anthony turning again to face Fitzpatrick.
“Your clothes! Something you’ve been wearing or carrying has been spelled. We’re going to have to check everything!”
“Everything?” asked Anthony with dismay.
“Yep, and maybe a body inspection after that if we don’t find anything…”
“Not here!” protested Scorpius while looking at Pilkington and Wycliff. Pilkington rolled her eyes. “We’ll be leaving if it gets to that,” she assured them.
“You’re enjoying this,” observed Anthony as he reluctantly unbuttoned his robe.
“A chance to take you two down?” asked Fitzpatrick cheerfully. “Who wouldn’t?”

“Seriously?” asked Pilkington in a bored voice. “Malfoy and Richards are both arrogant, rude, obnoxious prats but they are not the enemy! Get over it!”

Fitzpatrick’s smug grin vanished and his face took on a more serious expression. “Pity,” he muttered.

“What happens now?” asked Anthony as he handed Pilkington his robe.

“If we’re lucky, we find something,” answered Potter. He took hold of Anthony’s robe and helped spread it out on the table for inspection.

“And if we’re not?” asked Scorpius as he removed his robe.

“Then we look some more...”

Anthony felt a flush of guilt remembering the year Potter had spent falling over everything. They had all known something was wrong but hadn’t cared. Four days of smothered mirth and guffaws behind his back had been awful, but a whole year?

“Mostly we’re interested in something you wear or do every day,” murmured Pilkington as she peered over the robes. “Jinx spells wears off quickly and would have to be renewed frequently,” she added. “Something that has been hexed or jinxed would require close proximity to be effective.”

“Hopefully we’ll find something that doesn’t belong like the jinx stones you slipped into our bags first year,” stated Wycliff. “Something that’s different or changed from four days ago...”

“That one wasn’t my idea,” Anthony volunteered instantly while turning out his pockets. Not that he hadn’t done his share of jinxing and distributing stones after someone else made the suggestion... A loud “clunk” sounded. Anthony looked down at the bronze knut that had fallen on the floor. “I keep my money in my other pocket...” he stated aloud. He reached into the other pocket and quickly counted out the change he found there. Anthony knew to the exact knut how much money he had and, including the one on the floor, he was one knut over...

“Don’t touch it!” instructed Pilkington quickly when Anthony knelt down to pick it up. Anthony froze and withdrew his hand from the coin.

“I suppose you could jinx coins as easily as stones,” stated Wycliff speculatively.

“Clever,” stated Scorpius approvingly. “No one throws away money.”

“And I’d not be likely to spend it any time soon,” added Anthony knowing that at most, he would have transferred the knut to his other pocket had he found it and been pleasantly surprised if his tally turned up one more knut than he thought he had.

Using her foot, Pilkington carefully scooted the knut to the corner of the room promising to destroy it later when they finished.

“So, I guess that’s that,” stated Scorpius reaching for his robe.

“Nope, we continue searching,” stated Fitzpatrick firmly. “Never stop with the first thing you find. Hopefully that coin is the only thing but it might not be. Once the kidnapper realizes you no longer have the coin, he may find a way to plant something else on you. It would be a good idea to see what else you have so if you start tripping again we’ll be able to recognize if there is something different...

An hour later nothing new or suspicious had been found. What remained was to confirm that the extra knut was indeed the culprit. That meant Anthony had to go about his usual day without it and see if he continued to trip and fall... Which he fortunately did not.

When Anthony tripped in the bathroom two days later, Scorpius found an extra sickle in his pocket. It was quietly removed and destroyed—Scorpius did it easily—something he had learned from his Grandfather...

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“May I have a word with you, Wycliff,” asked Anthony Richards quietly. They were in the orchard watching the moths pollinate the trees. Pollination happened in the morning. Basu had gotten her students to slow the growing process timing things so the harvesting team could come in late afternoon to pick the ripened fruit and get it properly stored before the end of the day. At the
moment, there was a surplus of food so Basu instructed her students to further slow the speed of production by alternating days in which fruit and vegetables needed pollinating and harvesting so the task was not so demanding...

The pollinating moths had been colour coded so the pollinators (all older students) could keep track of which moths were pollinating which trees. The Gemino spell had temporarily multiplied the number of moths into the thousands. The pollinators had to work quickly to pollinate the trees before the Gemino spell wore off. At the moment, a thick cloud of pastel pink covered the apple trees. Light coloured yellow moths covered the lemon trees, and pale orange clouds drifted between the orange trees. Light purple moths swirled over the plum trees. The moths created clouds of colour that moved from tree to tree, never stopping. It was quite relaxing to watch. The orchard had become the favorite hang-out for students.

Wycliff handed the board and quill in her hand to Smith, who sat next to her and stood. Smith hastily stood also.

“Alone,” stated Anthony firmly. He had already arranged for Scorpius to help the students at the other end harvest whatever fruit was ripe. Smith looked uncertainly from Antony to Wycliff.

Wycliff rolled her eyes. “I’ll be fine,” she assured. “We’ll just be over there,” she added nodding towards the huge redwood tree in the middle of Lulu’s pen, once the home for an obnoxious Roc Hagrid insisted on raising…. Smith nodded and sat back down.

Anthony followed Wycliff to the redwood. Potter had taken his broom and flown to the top of the tree, or, rather, tried to. The top of the tree was a visual image only, part of the impassible barrier that surrounded their prison. “Don’t they ever leave you alone?” he questioned conversationally. Ever since he realized the Hufflepuffs had put Wycliff on a “suicide” watch Anthony had become aware that he never saw Wycliff alone. Of course, no one could travel alone after Basu’ attack, and the Hufflepuffs always traveled in groups. But that close association had taken on a new meaning to Anthony in regards to Wycliff.

Wycliff looked briefly at him and then turned her attention to the cloud swirling moths moving to the next tree. “No,” she admitted while staring out at the moths.

A cloud of purple swirled into a cloud of pink, mixed and then separated out again on their way to the next tree. Bored with pollinating responsibilities, the Pollinators had taken to performing tricks with colour shape motion and form. “Poetry for the eyes,” said one Hufflepuff watching the show.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” questioned Anthony. Ever since he’d taken charge of the leadership, he’d been uncomfortably aware of the eyes on him all the time, more so after he’d made the promise to Wycliff.

“They mean well,” said Wycliff not answering his question. “What did you want?”

“A favour, of sorts,” began Anthony cautiously. “Something you can do for me now in exchange for, you know…”

“Killing me later?” questioned Wycliff.

“Yeah. I mean it’s not like you can do anything for me afterwards… And it really isn’t just for me,” he continued in justification… “It’s something for everyone, something only you can do…”

“What?”

“Your elf!”

“What?”

“That house elf of yours,” clarified Anthony. “I know you have one, I saw it that first night,” he continued in a rush. “And knowing that, I’m fairly certain you weren’t fixing all that food for us when we were sick! It had to be that elf! The food was good, Wycliff, really good and everyone knows it! As a result, we’re all scheming ways to get some more of that food!”

“No you’re not!” she argued.

“We Slytherins are,” countered Anthony. “Myself included.” There was no Pilkington’s Ball to crash this year so the conversation in their makeshift dorm centered on ways to get more food out of Wycliff. Would she continue cooking and sell it on the side?

Several Slytherins remembered that Anthony had gotten Wycliff up and moving when no one
else could and had privately approached Anthony about getting more food… Their offers had been attractive. Others had noticed how much time Wycliff had spent with Anthony in the infirmary and had quietly approached him as well… Their offers had been equally attractive. Then Anthony had approached other students he thought might be similarly inclined… The response was very, very positive. All Anthony had to do was get Wycliff to cooperate...

Anthony closed his eyes in bliss remembering the soup he’d had. He opened his eyes.

“There’s even been talk of deliberately getting sick again…” Anthony told Wycliff, “despite that relapse potion!” Those were the sillier ideas. There were other plots afoot, a lot of plots! “We’re tired of the same food!” Anthony continued. “It’s all cold!” he complained, “even when the kitchen refreshes! The food is immediately taken to the annex to be properly chilled so it will last as long as possible. And there it stays. Cold.”

“You can heat it,” Wycliff said stubbornly.

“Yeah, burnt on the outside and cold in the center,” complained Anthony commenting on his own efforts to warm food. “And there’s the fresh fruit! Cold crunchy apples and cucumbers get old after a while; believe me they’re old now!” That gazpacho they’d had one day in the infirmary had been divine! It was cold but still wonderful! How had all those flavors been found amongst the available food?

“And the grain Basu wants to harvest,” continued Anthony aloud. “You have any idea how to fix it? How to turn it into bread? I don’t! What are we supposed to do—eat it raw? How are we supposed to eat the grass she’s proposing to harvest? Your elf would know.”

Wycliff wrapped her arms around her body tightly and shook her head. “It’s just one elf!” she said. “Hogwarts had lots of elves in the kitchen!”

“So? I know lots of students who would be happy to help out!” Like everyone! All the Slytherins would happily trade work for snacking privileges; the students of the rest of the houses hadn’t actually eaten any of the food but they’d heard stories and looked enviously at those who had so Anthony was certain they’d be happy to help too… There would also be a big market and profit to be had if she put the food up exclusively for sale, but Anthony knew better than to suggest that.

“But what will they do when they find out I’ve had an elf all this time and didn’t…”

“We all have our secrets,” replied Anthony with a shrug. But he guessed most everyone already knew or suspected Wycliff had an elf. When reminiscing about their meals, it occurred to Anthony how very Wizard the food had been. No Mudblood would know such recipes… No doubt other Slytherins had realized that as well. Even now there were probably plans afoot to get the elf, get Wycliff to grant them secret use of the elf… But Anthony knew Wycliff would not be blackmailed or forced…

“Like you said,” he agreed aloud, “it’s only one elf. If anyone asks, you can tell him you didn’t want to play favorites. Or, if you want to keep it a secret, you can create a cooking class, by invitation only,” he suggested. “That way you can get help from students who will keep your secret too. Bottom line, you could keep us all healthier and happier if you tell your elf to fix food for us, all of us… Think about it,” he told her and walked off.

Truth, honesty and sincerity. Wycliff would listen to nothing else and that’s exactly what Anthony had given her. Anthony had also included reasons he knew would appeal to a Hufflepuff, and specifically Wycliff. Given time, Anthony was fairly certain Wycliff would find a way to use the elf in food production.

The nice thing about being watched was that everyone knew Anthony and Wycliff had talked. When Wycliff started using her elf to prepare food for everyone, as Anthony felt certain she would, Anthony would claim responsibility for persuading her. It would increase his stature as leader with the rest of the students. In addition, Anthony could also collect on all the private deals he had cut with the other students. Those deals collectively were worth more than anything he had ever negotiated in Diagon Alley! Anthony would be set for quite a while…

***********
“We should hold our meetings in the Great Hall for a while,” stated Pilkington one day. “And earlier.” She and the other Advisors were outside with Anthony Richards walking about and talking as they did every morning.

Mostly the five talked about plans for the day and problems that might surface. Wycliff rarely spoke except on health matters and tended to report only on the general health and emotions of the students. Fitzpatrick was ruthlessly blunt about the success of daily operations and complained about students (mostly Slytherins) who did not do their fair share. Malfoy was equally blunt in responses and Pilkington often proposed possible compromises when there was a difference of opinion. Gradually Anthony had come to realize that the subject or content of their conversations never surfaced elsewhere. That meant his “Advisors” didn’t talk to the others about what they had said; they could all say what they truly thought instead of what they thought each other wanted to hear... Anthony came to welcome the opportunity to bounce off ideas with them before tackling similar topics with the prefects.

“Huh? Why?” asked Anthony. It was Pilkington who suggested they meet outside in the first place—away from possible listening ears… Wycliff had agreed citing the fresh air would be good for him.

“There’s something you should see...” said Pilkington mysteriously.

Pilkington wouldn’t explain further insisting it was something they see first. His curiosity aroused, Anthony agreed to hold their meetings in the Great Hall. It was empty in the mornings anyway. Like the Slytherins, the other students had moved off to new locations to sleep.

**********

Dear Grandmum,

The professors are impressed with my work. I am doing well in all my classes…

**********

The doors to the Great Hall swung open of their own accord. Anthony Richards looked up and watched a slender young girl wearing wizard robes walk in. She had long brown hair neatly braided in back and wore a traditional Hogwarts uniform. Weird; no one wore uniforms, not here.

“Recognize her?” asked Pilkington in a whisper.

“No,” answered Anthony, though she looked faintly familiar.

Fitzpatrick, Wycliff and Scorpius shook their heads as well.

“Why ask us,” questioned Scorpius. “She’s sitting at the Ravenclaw table; that means she’s a Ravenclaw...”

“You would think so,” agreed Pilkington. “Except we don’t know who she is either.”

“Huh?” Anthony looked at Pilkington in surprise. “How could that be?” He knew all the students in the Slytherin House, by sight, if not by name. Surely the Ravenclaws did too.

“Look, she’s reading,” pointed out Pilkington.

Anthony looked at the girl in surprise. Yes, she had an opened book in front of her and appeared to be reading… How had that happened? The book must have been under her wizard robes; he hadn’t seen her carry it in...

“Oh, for goodness sake!” stated Scorpius with impatience. “You and your puzzles! You Ravenclaws take mysteries to a new level ... of stupidity! Instead of standing around and wondering who she is, why don’t you just ask her?”

“That is easier said than done,” Pilkington replied vaguely.

“Yeah, right!” said Scorpius scornfully. “Watch me!” he added confidently while walking up to the girl. “Hey!” he asked her. “What’s your name?”
“I’m talking to you!” Scorpius said angrily as he reached her side but the girl ignored him. Scorpius reached out, tried to grab her book and she vanished!

“Huh? What the—”

The surprise on Scorpius’ face mirrored Anthony’s own sense of astonishment.

“Like Professor Longbottom!” whispered Fitzpatrick.

“Yes,” agreed Pilkington. “But unlike Professor Longottom, she keeps coming back, which makes her very interesting indeed.”

“Coming back?” echoed Anthony in disbelief. “Like every day?” How could he have missed that?

“No,” answered Pilkington, “only on special days.”

“Oh, there you are!” exclaimed Faraz Seth (H1) running into the Hall. He stopped just beyond the huge opened doors to catch his breath. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you, sir!” he added.

“Why?” questioned Anthony.

“There’s food in the kitchen!” Seth said excitedly. “We’ve got meat again!”

“She comes only on the days the kitchen refreshes…” said Pilkington dryly.

***********

“We need a name for this place,” stated Huckaby at one of the prefect meetings. “It’s not Hogwarts and we need to think of something else to call it…”

“Hogwarts II?”

“Warthogs?”

“Thogswar?”

“Groshaw?”

“Why don’t we hold a contest?” suggested Moore…

***********

“Holly! Come quick! There’s been an accident!”

***********

“Thank you so much for coming,” began Dean Thomas, head of Magical Law Enforcement.

“No problem,” answered Harry Potter. “Is there any news?”

“First things first. How is Holly?” Dean had contacted Harry and specifically asked him to check again on the Wycliff Heathstone…

“Fine, at least there has been no change in her Heathstone, but beyond that…”

“Good enough.”

“So what’s up?”

“Not much,” Dean admitted. “A few of the parents reported a change in their children’s Heathstones…”

“Who? What kind?”

“A, uh, Riley Shipman and Winston D’Airelle,” Dean answered looking down at the papers in front of him for reference. “Nothing serious,” he told Harry, “the kind of thing we’d see after the first few broomstick practices… The colour is lasting longer than usual for a broom injury, though.”

“I know Shipman’s good on a broom,” stated Harry informatively remembering how Shipman had followed Holly and Sir from Meadowsgate last year. “I can’t imagine her getting injured that way but who’s D’Airelle?”

“One of the Firsts,” answered Dean. “He hasn’t been sorted yet, obviously, but his parents are Ravenclaws. They were rather upset when his stone changed colour; they’ve been certain that if
anyone could figure a way home, it would be Winston…”

“Did any Slytherins report a colour change?”

“No. Rather, I’ve no idea. They still won’t admit they’ve got Healthstones, but at least Crowley isn’t asking for Sympathy cards…”

Harry shuttered. He still didn’t know what that was all about, but the Slytherin parents were back on the streets of Diagon Alley without wands raised… “That’s something,” he said aloud.

“Yes.”

“Any news on the investigation?” Harry asked hopefully.

“No leads, no ransom demands, no sightings, nothing. We only know a few Healthstones have turned colour, which would appear that at least the Healthstones are working.”

“And the hope that all the students are all together, so those without Healthstones are also in good health…”

“Yes. But that doesn’t get them back.”

“No, it doesn’t,” agreed Harry. “How are you doing?”

“Me?” questioned Dean with obvious surprise, “I’m fine—oh, you mean Rita’s call for a new Head of Magical Law Enforcement?”

“Uh, yeah,” admitted Harry uncomfortably. When Dean and the aurors had been unable to find the students, Rita transferred the rage and pain of the parents into a call for new administration. Both Dean and Kingsley had been under attack for their failure to find the students.

“I’d happily give up my job if it meant the safe return of those children!” Dean told Harry.

“Unfortunately, no one has stepped up with a way to find or get them back! And I won’t step down without a replacement who can do that.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I’ve personally visited every loudmouth who thinks he can do better and asked him for his ideas. I’ve even promised to give him all the credit if he could actually make good on his promise to find the children… and no luck! If this were some plot to topple the Ministry you’d think someone in the wings would be stepping in to try and replace us! So far, nothing. Frankly, I’ve run out of ideas.”

Harry nodded sympathetically. He hadn’t any ideas either. The only thing he had was the Healthstone Ginny wore—it still shone with perfect health. His children were still fine; there was still a chance to get them home alive…

***********

Dear Grandmum,

My classes are getting more difficult; I have to spend more time completing schoolwork…

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“You’re looking particularly well, this morning,” greeted Wycliff. “Is that a new suit?”

“Yes, it is,” stated Anthony proudly. It was one of three new complete sets of clothing! It was great having a change of clothes. Anthony had spotted Wycliff standing alone near the stadium. No, not quite alone; he noted the Breysburry clan, Smith and Owens standing off to one side obviously waiting. Anthony sent his own friends ahead when it became clear Wycliff was waiting for him.

“You dressed up for a Quidditch match?” she questioned curiously.

“Yes, well, it is a day to celebrate,” Anthony reminded her. “It’s your cooking class’ first full meal and, judging from the rumours I’ve heard, it promises to be spectacular!” Every student had contributed a portion of their share of the food to make the meal happen. Anthony privately hoped they’d be serving that Gazpacho again, but it didn’t matter. It would be proper food and different!

“Mmmm. You didn’t tell me you had made deals about the food…” she accused.

“Because I didn’t,” denied Anthony piously. “I just asked some of the students what would
they give to have some of the food that was served in the infirmary…”

“I heard they paid you to talk me into it!”

“Merely some tokens of appreciation…” Anthony answered dismissively.

“You used me!”

“Not in the least, I merely informed you of the situation and suggested some solutions. The choice was all yours.”

“You used me!” she repeated. “I won’t be a—a—”

 “…tool, Yes, I know,” said Anthony impatiently. “This is not about you being a tool; nobody cares about you or your empathic abilities. It’s about having the only house elf in this place! That elf is a valuable commodity! And you made it even more valuable by keeping it secret! You opened yourself to all sorts of plots to trick, trap or force you into using that elf for private benefit. I told you there were plans to get more of that food,” he reminded her. “I was serious. I was the subject of many of those plans. Several students came to me and asked if I would talk to you about the food. I agreed because I knew if I said “no” then they would try some other way, something more devious…”

“You could have just said “yes,” she told him.

“I did.”

“Without demanding payment.”

“And waste a marvelous opportunity? That would have been foolish. Besides, they wouldn’t have believed me,” replied Anthony. “By taking payment they knew I would follow through with my word and make a genuine effort to get results. And yes, I accepted a generous payment,” admitted Anthony. As high as he could make it. “If I had taken less, I would have belittled the value of the service provided and I would have lost the respect of my fellow students as a leader able to get things done.”

“What did you get?”

“Enough to acquire a set of clothes for all the Firsts,” Anthony admitted. The Firsts were his main base of support; it was important to reward them for their loyalty. Using the proceeds to benefit others was also something a Hufflepuff would do, so Wycliff could not help but approve…

“But we took care of them…” she protested.

“The Hufflepuff Firsts, yes. But the other houses were not so generous with their Firsts,” he told her. He’d also gotten gifts for Basu and Malfoy and anyone else who had assisted him…

“That’s a new outfit you’re wearing!” Wycliff reminded accusingly.

“I left my trunk on the train too,” Anthony told her. “So, yes, I got myself some clothes,” he said without guilt. And an extendable box where he could keep his things, a spell protected lock, a personalized anti-theft spell, a small cauldron, mortar and pestle, several items of barter value, and a rather heavy bag filled with coins… “It may interest you to know that by doing this I set a baseline for future requests,” he added aloud.

“There won’t be any future requests!” Wycliff told him firmly.

“I don’t know as if that is up to you or me,” replied Anthony. “You still have the only house elf in the area and you are the only one able to give it orders.”

“I’m perfectly capable of handling that sort of stuff without you!” Wycliff said primly.

“You are a Hufflepuff with a soft heart and a guilt complex,” answered Anthony bluntly.

“You’d rather die than risk saying “yes” to a kidnapper…” he reminded her. “How much chance do you think you’d have against a proper sob story?”

“Easily,” replied Wycliff. “I don’t think Winky can handle much more than fixing food anyway, even with the help. It takes too long.”

Anthony felt a surge of hope and excitement. Food? All day! Every day! Instead of just a meal?!!! YES! “Duly noted,” Anthony stated aloud in a calm voice. “If anyone bothers you about the elf, send them to me. If they persist, tell them you charge five galleons just to listen to their request…”

“Five galleons!” exclaimed Wycliff. “That’s outrageous!”

“Exactly. They’ll learn to leave you alone and come to me if they’re really serious. I’ll let you
know they want and you can decide what you want to do...”

“But what if—”

“Why don’t we discuss this later,” interrupted Anthony. “I believe the game is about to
start...”

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“Welcome to the first H2 Quidditch game!” announcer Jordon Vaughn (G5) said loudly as
Anthony made his way to his seat. Anthony had heard Vaughn had spent many hours practicing the
announcer spell so she could use her wand to speak and be heard by all. There was a special place
for dignitaries in the stadium. Anthony Richards insisted on sitting there; it was his right. And then
he suggested the prefects, Head Boy and Girl and his “Advisors” sit there as well. It wouldn’t look
proper to sit there alone. Wycliff didn’t like the idea, but Anthony wanted Scorpius there so that
meant inviting the Advisors.

Getting a Quidditch game together proved more difficult than anyone had expected. There
were no spell books in the library on creating Quidditch materials. Everyone was forced to
improvise.

Some of the students enlarged an orange, peeled it and used the rind as a pattern to make the
Quaffle. They cut up one of the non-moving tapestries and stitched it together in the shape of a ball.
Who would have ever thought that that stupid transfiguring trick of turning matches to needles taught
to Firsts would turn out to be so useful... The tapestry was dyed red (coloured ink from Breysburry’s
art supplies) and filled with potting sand from Greenhouse 3 to give it the right weight.

It had been easy enough to transfigure a walnut from off their food/seed supplies to make
something looking like a snitch, but the wings (enlarged moth ones) didn’t flap much and the
“snitch” didn’t fly let alone move around above the pitch on its own. So they got a new walnut,
opened it, took out the meat making it lighter and glued both sides to an origami paper crane body.
Charlotte MacKenzie (G3) was into origami and had made the crane. The new “snitch” flew
beautifully, but wasn’t very fast. So they increased the wing fluttering speed so it would fly faster
and the paper wings crumpled... After more trial and error the wings were strengthened enough to
withstand the faster speeds but their “snitch” did little more than zoom off in a straight line...

Things came pretty much to a standstill at that point until Ivy Malfoy (S3) found the toad in the
Trophy Room. Her squeal would have woken the dead, had there been any. And when the toad
didn’t hop away at her screams, she screamed even more—certain the toad was dead! Ivy was a pain
even if she was Slytherin.

Closer examination revealed not one but several toads all nestled in the straw intended to
protect the fruit from bruising.

“No, they aren’t dead,” assured Rory Muir (S7) “Just hibernating.” Muir had tired of
transfiguring bits of meat into crickets and other insects for his toad and had decided it would be best
if his toad hibernated so he wouldn’t have to feed it. After careful consideration Muir decided the
cooler temperatures of the fruit storage room (A.K.A. the Trophy Room) was the perfect
environment to get his toad to hibernate. When he realized other toad owners had either tired of
creating toad food (or never properly mastered the insect shaping spells,) he had started a brisk
business to hibernate and store their toads along with his...

Anyway, the hibernating toads gave Pilkington an idea... They took a hibernating toad (with
the owner’s permission, of course) and shrank it (Reduco spell) until it could fit inside a slightly
enlarged walnut shell (transfigured silver and padded to protect the toad.) Then the Ravenclaws
modified the anti-Muggle spell to repel toads instead of Muggles. They set the anti-toad spell/wards
up around the quidditch pitch. Their toad-filled “snitch” still flew straight, but when it encountered
the anti-toad ward, it bounced off and zoomed away in a new direction, only to run into another anti-
toad ward and another and another... The resulting direction changes were unpredictable enough to
create, not quite the real thing, but a “snitch” that worked well enough for a game... They just had to
keep the “Snitch” cold to insure the toad inside wouldn’t wake or get scared... A “chill” spell was
used for the game and the "snitch" was stored with the fruit when not in use…

Creating Bludgers were equally difficult. Bludgers were apparently made of iron. No iron balls existed on the H2 grounds. Nor did student efforts to melt and reform the metal into balls on the premises work. So they took a smaller brick of the castle wall (in an area where it would refresh) and painstakingly chipped and shaped it into something resembling a ball the size of a Bludger… A couple of polishing spells smoothed the ball and made it gleam.

Meanwhile, other students were busy making bats to hit the Bludgers. They combed the trees that lined the grounds until they found promising looking branches. Using a blasting spell they broke off the branches and painstakingly shaped them.

Once finished, the bats and Bludgers had to be tested... No one knew the spells that caused the Bludgers to attack players. While waiting for the development of successful Bludger spells, four students used the Wingardium Leviosa spell to lift a Bludger up and aim/shoot the Bludger towards the waiting students. Three students, all on handmade brooms, two with bats, and one behind the others to be protected waited in the air. Beginner Ravenclaw Winston D’Airelle swung first; then back-up Slytherin Beater Martina Goyle (S6) swung… Both hit the Bludger with full force. The Bludger plowed through D’Airelle’s bat snapping D’Airelle’s wrist that held the bat in the process. Then the Bludger dislocated Goyle’s shoulder when she used her bat to try and stop it. The Bludger went on to splinter the broom Seeker Hufflepuff Riley Shipman (2nd) was riding and sent her crashing to the ground. Apparently wooden bats can’t stop stone Bludgers—who knew? Shipman suffered a concussion and a broken hip.

Unfortunately, they didn’t have any potion to repair bones. Worse, they discovered some of the ingredients needed to brew the potion were not in Slughorn’s potion supplies… Wycliff, the unofficial Healer, grounded D’Airelle, Goyle and Shipman until they made a full recovery, Muggle style! No one knew how long that would take. Then Wycliff insisted they use less dangerous materials for their version of Quidditch and install a moth net beneath the area of play, one strong enough to catch any falling players. She did not want any more broken bones! Wycliff also demanded the players wear protective gear—a helmet ("No more concussions!") and body covering, something hard enough to take the brunt of a blow should one be hit by a Bludger.

No one said "no" to Wycliff. She was their Healer, after all. And when the first student grumbled, Wycliff threatened to cancel her “cooking” classes so she’d have more time to tend to the Quidditch injuries if they didn’t take proper safety precautions…

Accordingly, the suits of armor in the Entry were promptly cannibalized for protective gear parts. There weren’t enough suits for everyone so the helmets were padded and fitted for the Seekers, who also had to wear the iron chest pieces and iron gloves and leg guards for protection. The extra weight slowed them down, but the “snitches” were slower too so that evened out… Padded body protection, stitched from the heavy curtains, was made for everyone else. More bats were made. Strengthening spells were added this time. More tapestry was cut, stitched, dyed black and filled with sand for the Bludgers.

“Look, here come the teams now!” stated Vaughn excitedly as fourteen students, each carrying his/her own handmade broom, all clad in blue (from the curtains in the Ravenclaw dorm,) proudly walked out upon the pitch. The pitch was covered with knotgrass and scurvy grass all in expectant bloom… The Herbology students had harvested the grain several times during all the practicing. The game was delayed a day just to make sure the grass was ready for pollination again…

“Team Blue Moon Hippogriffs, headed by Janet Turner...” (H4) The name was solely decided upon by the team players. The teams were not made up from any one specific House but, rather, of those who completed their brooms and wanted to play… The only qualifying condition to the team name was that everyone had to agree… There had been a lot of spirited discussions between students before they agreed upon a name. “…And team Yellowtail Dragons, headed by Arthur Reid, (G4)” finished Vaughn. “They’re the ones with the yellow, of course,” she added for further explanation. Yellow strips, cut from a couple Hufflepuff robes, were sewed onto the padded uniforms making bright stripes in their otherwise blue outfits. The two Seekers wore shiny suits of armour. A tabbard bearing the team colours was thrown over their shoulders covering the chest and back pieces.
“Referee Potter is reminding the teams of the rules,” Vaughn observed. Albus Potter could have been one of the seekers; he was good enough and had done it before, but Potter had spent so much time teaching the other students, they had requested he be the referee… “Now the Seekers are mounting their brooms…”

The Seekers got on first. It took them longer than everyone else. Their suits were heavy and cumbersome; they needed someone to steady the broom while they got on. Scorpius, the Slytherin Seeker, had taken a look at all the gear Wycliff insisted the students wear and refused to play… “They look ridiculous flying about in those suits of armour!” he scoffed derisively. Anthony agreed, but he had also heard Goyle scream in pain until they had gotten her shoulder back in place, had seen the white bone splinters and blood as they tried to set D’Airelle’s wrist and had visited Shipley in the infirmary, still unable to walk. They had been lucky the injuries hadn’t been worse. Broken bones were humorous when they were no big deal to heal, but without the bone-mending potion, they couldn’t afford to play regular Quidditch.

“The rest are now mounting their brooms…” Potter, holding a huge bag under his arm, mounted his broom as well. It was his own broom, purchased in Diagon Alley. Potter’s broom was faster than the ones they had made and the students practicing had all decided that the Diagon Alley brooms (there were some others brought by regular Quidditch players, but not enough for a proper game,) gave the riders an unfair advantage so wouldn’t be used… “And the net is raised…” While Vaughn spoke, a row of 3rd year students on either side of the pitch raised the specially modified net up two meters from the ground (beneath the players) and attached it to the walls of the stadium.

“Now Potter is opening the bag…” The bag in Potter’s arms contained the Snitch, Bludgers and Quaffle. All eyes were on Potter. His broom rose gracefully up above the players and then suddenly shot out towards a wall. Then the broom moved up and around making a complete loop in the air. “Ohhh!” came the collective gasp of the onlookers. Only the boldest attempted a full loop-de-loop on a broom. Riders tended to fall off the broom at the top if not done properly… The Quaffle, Bludgers and Snitch all fell out of the bag while Potter completed the loop and the game was on!

“Show-off!” snorted Scorpius disdainfully in Anthony’s ear. “I could have done better without the wobble at the top!” he boasted.

“You could volunteer to drop the balls next time,” Anthony suggested. “You wouldn’t have to wear all that gear…”

“No!” decided Scorpius aloud. “I might have to referee too!” He shuttered visibly, presumably at the prospect.

Anthony nodded sympathetically. He doubted Scorpius would mind refereeing as much as doing a loop-de-loop in front of everyone. There had been no wobble at the top of Potter’s loop and Anthony knew Scorpius’ previous attempts at a loop-de-loop didn’t look nearly as graceful as Potter’s. There was no way Scorpius would put himself in a position to be embarrassed by Potter.

“Oh, look! That was a great save by Hugo Weasley!” Vaughn commented as Weasley hit the Bludger away from the Seeker. Hugo Weasley was a Beater for the Hippogriffs. There were some magically enhanced magnets inside each Bludger. They went straight towards the armoured Seekers at the first opportunity.

“Oh no!” exclaimed Vaughn. It looks as if the Bludger’s got Lily! I hope she’s not hurt!” That was Lily Potter, Vaughn’s best friend. She was the Seeker for the Dragons.

Anthony looked. Sure enough there was a fat round Bludger clinging to Potter’s armoured elbow. If the beaters missed beating the Bludger away, it would latch onto the metal armour like any magnet… “Prenderg better get it off soon!” added Vaughn. “No!” exclaimed Vaughn suddenly.

“That other Bludger’s got her too!” Distracted by the first Bludger, the Beaters had failed to stop the other Bludger that had veered their way. It was stuck to Potter’s back! “They’d better work fast to get them off!” continued Vaughn in a worried voice as the second Beater (another Prenderg) flew up to Potter. One took hold of Potter while the other pried the first Bludger off her arm. “If they don’t, there’s no way the Dragons can win!” she reminded the audience. Not only would the Bludgers seriously unbalance Potter, a Snitch caught while a Bludger was stuck on her would not be
considered a valid “catch.” “Well, they could,” amended Vaughn, “but only if they score a lot of points before Seeker Azi gets the Snitch and that’s not likely to happen… Daren (Daren Azi (R4)) was a Seeker last year and he’s very good on a broom… Look!” shouted Vaughn suddenly. “Chaser Ashcroft, that’s Blaize Ashcroft, has moved in to help,” Ashcroft took hold of Potter while the other Prenderg took hold of the other Bludger. Finally, Potter broke free and zoomed off while the Prendergs hung on to the Bludgers. “And she’s out!” announced Vaughn cheerfully while Ashcroft held out a Bludger and Prenderg used his bat to hit it firmly towards Azi.

“Oh, dear, the Hippogriffs have managed to score 20 points while all that was happening!” Vaughn stated in a surprised sounding voice while one of the Prendergs shot off the second Bludger towards Azi. “This game moves fast! Look!” she announced excitedly. “Crabbe shot that Bludger right back at Potter! I hope Prenderg gets it this time!” Vincent Crabbe took a lot of ribbing when he first put on the protective suit Wycliff demanded of the players. But Crabbe wasn’t good at much of anything but being a Beater so he suffered their taunts and practiced with the rest. “…a brilliant block by Jesse Prenderg!” Vaughn commented as Prenderg hit the Bludger away from Potter. “Or was that Jerome?” she corrected herself. “They’re both in my House and I still can’t tell them apart!” she admitted. “Never mind. Weasley just blocked that second Bludger and sent it straight for his cousin! They had a fight this morning and I hope it doesn’t affect the game!” confided Vaughn. “Just because Lily is better on a broom than Hugo is no reason to get so mad…”

On and on the game went with the Bludgers going back and forth between Seekers. It should have been easy to catch the snitch with its fast, but predictable, ricochet pattern but the Seekers were so busy dodging Bludgers even with the help of the Beaters that it was easy to lose track of the snitch… Meanwhile the Chasers held their own separate game trying to score points passing the Quaffle between each other and through the hoops. The twin teamwork of beginner Chasers Galina and Geoffrey Bromadge combined with the experience of team captain and Chaser Janet Turner easily offset the combined efforts of the more experienced Chasers Blaize Ashcroft and Harriet Dempsey (H4) and beginner Taj Mallick. Keepers Reid and Benjie Barrington (H4) were both kept busy trying to stop the scoring… The two teams seemed well matched.

The game was neck and neck until Potter caught the snitch making the final score 350 to 120. It wasn’t a brilliant catch by anyone’s standards. Potter was dodging a Bludger and the snitch ran into her! It was dumb luck the collision caused a wing to bend a bit and slow enabling her to grab the shell before it zoomed past… It didn’t matter. The snitch was caught and everyone cheered. Three cheers for the Yellowtail Dragons! The game had been hard fought on both sides; no one cared who won or lost. It had all been good entertainment, a welcome break from the pressing needs of survival. Weird watching a quidditch game without worrying about the outcome…

When the match ended, everyone gathered outside for a grand picnic meal. Wycliff’s cooking class put together enough food to feed the whole student body. There was an admission of sorts required. Some of the prefects had complained that they thought some students were not doing “their fair share” of the work. Anthony Richards would have just ignored the complaints and mentally applauded anyone not doing “their fair share” as someone smart enough to dodge responsibilities. But then the Advisors complained about it too. Wycliff said it wasn’t fair to those who worked. Fitzpatrick warned the complaining would get worse if nothing was done about the slackards. Even Scorpius admitted more students would do nothing if there were no consequence. So Pilkington suggested connecting work to the Quidditch banquet… Word got out that one had to tell Wycliff what you had accomplished before being permitted to eat at the banquet… Suddenly even the laziest student found some way to help out; no one wanted to miss out on the food and no one wanted to risk lying to Wycliff…

The food was marvelous! Familiar foods prepared in exciting new ways. Mulled apple cider for all, hot tomato soup, mixed garden greens with orange vinairette (how had they managed vinegar?) a proper beef stew with buttery knotgrass/scurvygrass rolls and dainty plum tarts for dessert…
Everyone ate until they could eat no more.
Chapter 19

Dear Grandmum,

It rained today. The rain made everything seem fresh and clean…

**********

“‘It’s raining!’”

“What?!?” Anthony Richards scrambled up out of his bed. Whether or not the kitchen reset, the outside had always been a constant. It never even occurred to him that it could change. Anthony made his way down the corridor, up the stairs and to the entrance of the castle. The huge doors to the outside were already open. Anthony stared outside in disbelief. Rain. A nice steady rain.

“But it wasn’t even cloudy yesterday,” whispered Donald Erskine (S3)

“No,” agreed Anthony. And now it was raining. How could it be? Then Anthony remembered they were prisoners in a huge bubble of the kidnapper’s making. The kidnappers had created everything else, why not rain?

“No!” exclaimed Basu pushing her way through the students crowded around the doors looking at the rain. Her long black hair hung loose about her shoulders and she wore a robe over her sleeping clothes. Heedless of proper rain gear, Basu didn’t stop at the entry but charged out into the rain and down the walkway. Anthony followed. Behind him came the other students. Basu headed straight to the orchard.

“No!” thought Anthony with a growing sense of panic. “Had something happened to the trees?” The trees were fine, as were the other plants growing there. But lying between the rows of growing trees and plants was a thick pile of colourful … goo? Anthony grabbed a stick and stirred the goo experimentally trying to figure out what it was… The stuff was gelatinous. It smelled! Like rotting—

“The moths,” whispered Basu coming to stand next to Anthony. “They weren’t waterproof!”

The goo took on new meaning. All the hours and hours of painstakingly creating moths and adding pollinating hairs—gone! They’d have to start from scratch again—well not totally, the trees were still there but there’d be no fresh food until they made new moths, until the rain stopped and they could pollinate again… Anthony felt devastated beyond belief.

The orchard filled with more and more students despite the falling rain, each wandering around aimlessly looking at the mess that was once moths.

“What’ll we do now?” questioned Blaize Ashcroft (R2) in a hollow voice.

“We go on,” said Woods resolutely.

“What’s the point?” argued Charlotte MacKenzie. (G3) “He’ll just destroy it all again!”

Anthony understood and agreed. Never had he felt so out of control. After an exciting quidditch game and a good meal there had been talk of doing it again. They had forgotten they were prisoners and were making plans for the future. It felt almost as if the rain was their punishment for having a good time!

“If he does, we’ll rebuild,” stated Albus Potter firmly. “And make it stronger.”

“And then he’ll do something else to ruin everything!” stated O’Shea bluntly.

“We can’t let the kidnappers win!” Potter said resolutely.

“Besides, you don’t know that the kidnappers did any of this!” stated Brian Brayden. (R6) “Perhaps it’s just time to rain.”

“It doesn’t usually rain in October,” stated Derrik Groarke. (S7)

“Did last year about now,” said Pavan Chopra confidently. (R5)

Had it? Anthony had no idea. Not that it mattered. Blue skies, no clouds, no breeze and a sun that rose and set like clockwork… It was obvious that the weather had been controlled by the kidnappers all along. Why hadn’t he thought of it earlier? What would they do next? A snowstorm?
“We’ve no other alternative but to go on,” added Corner practically.
There were, but none Anthony wanted to contemplate.

“At least the moths are compostable,” stated Smith (H6) in a positive sounding voice. She stood next to Wycliff surveying the damage. Her hair and clothing looked thoroughly soaked. Wycliff wasn’t looking around; she was staring at Anthony through the falling rain making a silent plea… “We won’t have to clean any of this up!” Smith added brightly. “And did you see Hagridge’s garden? I think the pumpkins are ripe! That means we’ve got pumpkin seeds now, and pumpkin for soup and pie…” Her voice died away. No one cared about food anymore.

Anthony met Wycliff’s gaze and, ever so slightly, shook his head causing the drops on his face to pool and drip off his chin. The rain was devastating, yes, but it was no proof of Wycliff’s fears. He would not honor his promise, not today. Wycliff turned and ran out of the orchard vanishing from sight. For once no one ran after her.

Anthony looked up at the gray sky. The rain continued to fall and showed no sign of stopping. He could feel the water soak into his clothes and drip off his hair down his neck. Anthony shivered, but he didn’t think it was because of the cooler temperatures or the rain. “If the garden’s different,” Anthony forced himself to say aloud, “then there could be other changes as well. We need to find out what they are… And we need to get out of this rain while we decide what to do next…”

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“Lumos!” whispered Holly Wycliff. The tip of her wand lit up giving off a soft yellow light. Holly tucked the wand (still lit) behind her ear and sat down making herself as comfortable as possible on the hard stone floor. Sasha, still invisible, leaped lightly in Holly’s lap and started purring contentedly. Besides Holly was the wall that opened into the Library.

Holly was seated just inside the corridor that led to the 7th floor. It was part of a Ravenclaw secret passage to the Library. Holly had used it often one year when she was experiencing Pettigrew flashbacks while going up the stairs. Though no one had specifically mentioned the passage’s existence, it was a Ravenclaw passage. Everything else Ravenclaw was there in H2 so Holly figured the passage was also. Entry to the passage required answering a single Ravenclaw style question. The librarian did not question that Holly was Ravenclaw. Perhaps the Librarian guarding a passageway was something only Ravenclaws were supposed to know. Anyway, Holly had gotten a history question, something obscure that a 1st or 2nd year student might find challenging: “Name Harry Potter’s Godfather.”

“Sirius Black!” answered Holly easily remembering the tall, thin man with the thick mat of tangled gray hair that hung over his shoulders; he had once saved her life. The portrait swung open and Holly was “in.” Holly told Winky to “stand guard” outside in the Library.

Holly placed her black and yellow extendable bag in front of her and opened it. She reached in and felt about until her fingers found the edge of a picture frame. Taking hold with both hands, Holly carefully pulled out a heavy thick brown frame… When it was completely out she set it on the floor and leaned it against the wall of the narrow passageway. The frame was empty. No, the canvas was there and there was a neatly painted background but there was no portrait. Holly didn’t expect there to be one. There hadn’t been the other times when Holly had closed the stall in Myrtle’s bathroom and secretly slid the frame out of the bag. But she could always hope.

“Are you there?” she whispered into the frame. Even in this secluded passageway, Holly feared someone would hear her, would find where she had gone off to and bring her back to the others. It was very much against the rules sneaking off like this, but sometimes Holly just couldn’t stand it any more… “Can you hear me?” she asked hopefully. “You were always there before to help me even when I didn’t know it so perhaps you’re there now, too, helping me though I don’t know it.” There was no response. The frame remained empty, as always. “At least you can listen,” she said determinedly. “And I really need someone to listen…” The Hufflepuffs were nice enough and Becky was still her best friend, but they just didn’t get it, didn’t get the world as she saw it. The Headmaster would understand…
“It’s still raining,” she whispered. “It’s the fifth day of solid rain,” she continued. “It doesn’t stop! Doesn’t get any worse, but doesn’t stop. The older students walk around with smiles on their faces and tell the others, “It’ll be all right,” but I know what they’re really thinking, and I don’t dare correct them and make them tell the truth because that would only make things worse!

Everyone is wet, cold and miserable,” Holly announced. “The firewood’s run out; it didn’t warm much anyway,” she told the frame. “The fire in the hearth now is just colour and flame, no heat. The Ravenclaws have been holding lessons on how to make warming charms and drying spells so that helps. But that doesn’t stop the rain.

And the food is getting low, real low… Richards posted guards around our food supplies and ordered the food be rationed until we got the orchards to produce again but even so, the Annex is empty and the Trophy room has only apples left! All our free time is spent making more moths! I’m so sick of those fluttery things. We’ve made hundreds of them, maybe thousands, all stored in the stairway for when the weather clears, which it maybe never will. There’s no point in making the moths waterproof as the flower petals fall off the stems in the rain so there’s nothing to pollinate.” Holly paused to take a breath and then continued, “I don’t know what they’re going to do about the scurvy grass—the rain washes away all the pollen so they’re not producing but they’re trying to turn the orchard into a greenhouse by putting a roof over it. It isn’t easy. The rain won’t stop and it’s a proper mess trying to do things with all the mud below and umbrella spells overhead. Actually,” Holly corrected herself, “it’s not really mud with all the moth gunk down there and maybe it’s good composting stuff but the moths haven’t decomposed properly and no one’s wanted to step in it. We finally had to dig up squares of grass and roots from outside and put on top of the gunk covering it just so we could walk about.

Richards is insisting we make an orchard roof using something permanent like glass to let the light in instead of something temporary that would be quick and easy,” continued Holly. “Do you know how hard it is to replicate glass? It’s very time consuming and when it doesn’t work right everything just shatters and you have to start over! Richards hasn’t really said why he wants the glass but I think he thinks the rain is just the beginning… I haven’t the guts to ask what he’s expecting that could be worse…”

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“There it is again!” complained the Portrait of Headmaster Snape. “Don’t you hear it?”

“Hear what?” asked the Portrait of Albus Dumbledore. They were hanging on the wall in Headmistress McGonagall’s office at Hogwarts. It was late at the night; the Headmistress had already gone to bed.

“That horrible buzzing noise,” he explained. “Can’t you hear it?” he asked again. “It’s so loud I can’t hear myself think!”

“No,” Albus said shaking his head. “Can you hear it Dilys?”

“No,” said the portrait of a lady with long silver curly ringlets. “Maybe it’s a House thing. Can you hear it Phineas?” she asked peering into the empty portrait that hung near her.

A wizard with a pointed beard wearing Slytherin colors of green and silver walked into his frame and cocked his head towards Severus’ portrait. “No, I can’t,” he told the group. “Maybe if I were in your frame…”

Severus’ portrait shrugged. “There isn’t much space,” he told Phineas, but go ahead and try. The noise really is annoying.”

The Phineas picture vanished from his frame and reappeared in Severus’ frame squishing in behind Severus. “Nope, I can’t hear anything,” he told the group. He cocked his head and listened intently at the ear beneath Severus’ long stringy black hair. “Nothing in your ears, either,” he added. “When did you start hearing things?”

“I don’t know,” reported Severus. “I was in the frame at Crowley’s flat when it started. She wasn’t around at the time; I figured something was going on outside that flat of hers, it’s in the middle of London, you know,” he told the others, “and not in a quiet location. I would have asked
Crowley about it but then the buzzing stopped. I’ve heard the same buzz a few more times but always late at night. That’s why I came here. I know what the nighttime noises are here and I was hoping I could get some peace and quiet… Unfortunately, it seems as if the buzz has followed me…” Severus’ face grimaced in annoyance. “You sure you don’t know what it is?”

“Perhaps we would, if we could hear it,” answered Albus.

“Maybe it has something to do with Miss Wycliff,” suggested Phineas after he moved back to his own frame.

“Highly unlikely,” retorted Severus. “The child does not “buzz” like a bee nor does she have the ability to get into my head this way. Besides, as I said before, I cannot find the frame that she took with her. It is as if it never existed. Perhaps the portrait artist did something wrong with the spells and they are unraveling…”

“I doubt that,” replied Albus. “If that were the situation, then I would be experiencing the same buzz… The same artist painted me, as you recall…”

“If it’s so annoying, why don’t you get rid of it!” suggested Everard, a sallow-faced wizard with short black bangs hanging in a different portrait frame.

“How!?” questioned Severus bluntly. “It’s not like I have a wand or anything.”

“I don’t know,” answered Everard. “Why don’t you just focus on the noise and tell it to “go!””

“Go?” questioned Severus.

“Yes, you know, just “go!” It’s your oils and your frame. Take control of them!”

Severus closed his eyes. “Go!” he muttered to himself. “Go! Go! Go!” He opened his eyes. “I don’t think that’s working,” he told the others.

“More likely you’re not really trying hard enough,” retorted Everard caustically. “You young portraits are so impatient…”

“I’m sure you can do it if you put your mind to it,” encouraged Phineas.

Severus closed his eyes again. “Go!” he commanded. “Go! Go! Go!” The painting of Severus Snape vanished.

“That’s not good,” muttered Everard noting the empty frame. “You are not supposed to vanish like that.”

“Severus? Severus, where are you?” called out Dilys.

“Check and see if he’s somewhere in the frame we can’t see,” suggested Albus.

“Nope, no one’s here,” reported Phineas after walking again into Severus’ frame… “He’s definitely gone!”

“Do you suppose he’s gone back to the frame at Crowley’s?” asked Dilys.

“Not and vanishing like that,” replied Albus. “He would have just walked out and over. “So what happened?” asked Phineas. He had returned to his own frame and was stroking his pointed beard worriedly.

“I don’t know,” answered Albus, “but it occurs to me your advice was poorly worded Everard.”

“What? To tell it to “go?””

“Yes. That implies leaving.”

“But that’s what Severus wanted!”

“True,” agreed Albus. “But he wanted the noise to leave, not himself. A better choice of words would have been “go away!” I suspect Severus has just “ordered” himself to “go!””

“Go? Go where?” questioned Dilys.

“A very good question,” answered Albus. “One I am afraid we cannot answer…”

“…I think Richards is finally taking the kidnapping seriously,” continued Holly Wycliff, “which is good, but he still doesn’t think the kidnapping is about me. He’s wrong about that but as long as he keeps his word, I can wait. But it’s so hard to wait and what if he fails? I’ve got a curtain cord all knotted and hung up in the rafters of the Great Hall, just in case. All I have to do is take the
broom in the corner and ride up to the rafters… Perhaps I can do it before anyone knows what I am up to… There’s another rope in the rafters of the stairwell… I had one hidden in the Owlery but they found that…”

And the Hufflepuffs won’t leave me alone!” Holly added. “I mean they’ve loosened up some but they still keep an eye out for me watching wherever I go and whatever I do. I know they mean well, but it’s so hard to be with them because they worry so—it’s positively claustrophobic!”

“I would worry about you too if I kept finding knotted ropes strung up in the rafters that you’d hidden…” came a familiar caustic voice. “Seriously,” it continued, “is that all you have to do with your time? I thought Hufflepuffs worked together; they can’t work together if one of you is always playing hide and seek!”

Holly opened her eyes and looked at the frame in disbelief, at the portrait that was suddenly there in front of the painted background—a familiar portrait with dark stringy hair, and piercing black eyes. “Oh my!” she exclaimed with wonder. “You’re here! You’re really there!”

“Of course I’m here!” retorted the portrait of Headmaster Snape. “Where else would I be with you talking like that?”

“But, I thought,” Holly broke off. “You never came before!” she told the portrait. “I didn’t think you could.”

“And you would be wrong,” the portrait told Holly dryly. “Obviously.”

“I’ve got to tell the others,” Holly said excitedly. “Tell them you’re here!”

“Why?” asked the Headmaster sardonically. “Haven’t they seen a portrait before?”

“Well, yes, of course,” answered Holly. “But not here! You’re the only one here!”

“And where is … here?” questioned the portrait, his lips curled up in a familiar sneer.

“Well, I don’t know,” exploded Holly. “None of us do! It looks like Hogwarts, but it isn’t! And we can’t leave! None of us! But now that you’re here, you can help us—”

“Do what?”

“Why get out, of course!”

“How?”

“Tell the others!” she told him.

“That you don’t know where you are?”

“Yeah, well, you can tell them what we do know and then together we can—”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” interrupted the portrait firmly.

“What? Of course it is!” argued Holly.

The Headmaster did not respond; he just glared at Holly with his inky black eyes. Holly gulped. “W-why not?” she questioned softly.

Headmaster Snape twisted his head and body around and placed his hands on the background moving them all around the picture background and frame before speaking. “Unfortunately,” he began while looking again at Holly, “I am not exactly sure how I got here and I am fairly certain I cannot go back…”

“Oh, no!” Holly moaned. “You too?” After a moment Holly added, “Oh, well, they’ll still be glad to see yo—”

“And turn me into a carnival sideshow?” he questioned. “I should say not! In fact, I forbid it!!!” Headmaster Snape stated imperiously drawing himself up to his full height, such that it was…

“You forbi—?”

“Furthermore, if you tell anyone about me I shall leave!”

“You can’t do that!” Holly protested. “Where would you go?”

“Well,” amended Headmaster Snape looking around his background thoughtfully. “I shall play Muggle and no one will believe you!”

“But, but why?”

“I shall not become the laughingstock of the full student body of Hogwarts!” the Headmaster said fiercely.

“No one would do that!” argued Holly. “Why would they do that?”

“I’m the Headmaster who was foolish enough to get caught just like the students! You tell
anyone I’m here and I’ll never talk to you again!”
“No!” exclaimed Holly horrified. “But they need to know!”

“Why?”

“Because you can tell them—”

“Tell them what? That their parents are worried? You already know that don’t you?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“That the Ministry has absolutely no idea where you are? That’ll be real reassuring!”

“Probably not, but—”

“There is no reason why anyone need know about me and I wish it to stay that way!”

Headmaster Snape commanded.

“You should be in charge!” Holly insisted.

“I am a portrait!” retorted Headmaster Snape.

“But you’re the Headmaster!” exclaimed Holly.

“My experience as Headmaster was dismal at best,” he replied acidly. “I do not wish to repeat it again. You have all managed quite fine without my presence; it can stay that way.”

“But we need your help!” insisted Holly.

“I will not be Headmaster again!”

“Not as Headmaster!” persisted Holly, “as Potions master!”

“What?”

“Potions master,” repeated Holly. “Riley and Winston! There was a bad Quidditch accident,” she told the Headmaster. “Riley broke her hip and Winston broke his wrist real bad! There were bone splinters showing through and everything! We set his wrist as best we could but we haven’t any bone mending potion,” Holly added. “I’ve been giving both Riley and Winston potion for the pain but they’re not healing! Not like I think they should be. And Goyle, she dislocated her shoulder,” Holly added. “We got it back in place so it’s better. She won’t admit it but it still hurts her—I don’t think things are mending right there either!”

“So make the proper potions!”

“We can’t!” exclaimed Holly. “We haven’t the ingredients!” And Holly told the Headmaster some of the limitations of H2. “But I was thinking,” she continued, “that you could maybe think up something we could make and use in place of the bone mending potion…”

“I’m no potions master,” denied the Headmaster.

“You are the best potions master!” insisted Holly solemnly. “Better than, even, Crowley!” she told him. “If anyone can do it, it’s you! Please?” she added hopefully. “They need you!”

A loud “crack” sounded. “They is looking for you, Mistress!” exclaimed Winky in a whisper.

“What?” begged Holly with a sense of urgency.

“Get me a list of everything in this place,” said the portrait of Headmaster Snape. “The food, potions, potion supplies, everything! And I’ll think about it,” he told her. “But don’t tell anyone about me!”

Holly smiled. “Thanks!”

“Holly?” came the voice of Mark Owens. “Are you back there?”

“Just a moment!” called Holly and with Winky’s help, she hastily put the portrait back in her extendable bag.

“What are you doing back here?” Mark asked as the portrait swung open letting him in. A white faced Becky Smith slipped in behind. Mark was pretty smart and probably had no difficulty with the Librarian’s question. “You’re not supposed to sneak out after curfew,” Mark added reprovingly.

“I, uh, needed some time alone,” Holly told him. “The emotions, they get to me after a while.”

“They’re all asleep!” Mark reminded as his emotions shouted out “disbelief” at the lie Holly had told. It was an obvious lie. Mark knew Holly couldn’t sense the emotions of those sleeping. Holly looked down, embarrassed, at the lie, but unwilling to admit the truth.

“Well, we were until we discovered you were gone…” he amended.

“You’ve got to stop doing this!” Becky scolded. “We’re all worried about you!”
Holly looked down and started twisting the hem of her shirt. She wanted to dance and shout to the world that the Headmaster had arrived but didn’t dare. She had to respect his wishes and needed his help too much. “S-sorry,” she whispered finally unable to talk about what had just happened and certain any facial expressions would give something away.

“It’s gonna be O.K.” Becky assured her though her emotions screamed otherwise. “We’re going to be O.K. You’ll see!”

“Yes,” Holly agreed softly while keeping her head resolutely down.

“That’s the spirit,” added Mark in a cheerful voice. “Let’s get back to the dorm. (The Hufflepuffs had moved all their things onto the fifth floor of Hogwarts.) “You need to get some sleep.”

“O.K.” Holly lifted her bag and followed the two back into the Library and up the stairs…

**********

Dear Grandmum,

I am very busy studying hard for my classes. I think we’ll be tested soon.

**********

“Let me get this straight,” began Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. “You think Snape is where?”

“With Miss Wycliff,” answered the portrait of Albus Dumbledore. “Wherever that may be…”

“But I thought he said he couldn’t do that!” exclaimed Minerva. School efforts to locate the missing students had been dismal. Firenze scanned the skies looking for omens; he said they boded well for the students, whatever that meant. Hagrid repeatedly searched the woods and had spoken to both the centaurs and his giant relatives with no success. Longbottom and Lovegood spent their time reading every missing person report she could find and digging through old musty records that contained accounts of vanishing spells. So far, she had found nothing useful. Trelawney was certain she could find them but kept falling asleep whenever she tried. Rather, was always sound asleep whenever Minerva checked on her and, after Minerva shook Trelawney awake, always claimed she must have fallen asleep while trying to find them… Trelawney was always a bit batty. Minerva worried she had crossed the line to incompetence.

“And so he did,” agreed Albus. “But he may have mis-spoken…”

“Explain.”

“Well, he is not here, nor is he in his other portrait and as there are only three portraits in existence, he must be in the third, which, as you already know, was in the possession of Miss Wycliff…”

“Three portraits?” questioned Minerva. There were three? “Who has the third?”

“Miss, uh Mrs. Crowley,” said Albus. “If I recall correctly, Miss Wycliff commissioned it last Spring. I believe it was a wedding gift…”

Minerva snorted. “A likely story,” she thought. “More likely it was for services rendered!”

Minerva was privately certain Paige had assisted in capturing Sir somehow… But that was a taboo subject. No one directly involved would say what happened to Sir and Minerva knew better than to ask. “You’re certain he is not with Miss Crowley?” questioned Minerva aloud.

“Yes, Phineas already asked Harry to check on that; Harry contacted Mrs. Crowley and confirmed Severus’ absence.”

“But if Snape is with Miss Wycliff, then we should notify the Ministry,” stated Minerva aloud.

“That is exactly what we should … not … do,” stated Albus firmly.

“But, why?” sputtered Minerva.

“Because there is still a kidnapper at large,” replied Albus. “The Ministry has gotten nowhere in its investigation,” he reminded Minerva. “There must be a reason for that. One that occurs to me is that the kidnappers have connections with the Ministry and are making sure the investigation goes
“So what are we to do?”
“You are to brush up on your speaking skills,” replied Albus.
“Speaking?”
“Yes, Severus reported hearing an annoying buzz before abruptly vanishing. It now occurs to us that that “buzz” was actually Miss Wycliff or some other student talking to his empty frame.”
“Why would she do that?” questioned Minerva.
“That, we do not know, but after much consideration I recall that Severus often referred to students’ constant conversation, their disruptive noises in class, as useless prattle and as annoying as an insect buzzing in his ear…”
“So?”
“If Severus is to find his way back here, he may need that “buzz” to help focus.”
“Focus?”
“Yes. You see, we told him to focus on that “buzz” and tell it to “go” right before he vanished…”
“So you are suggesting I create some “useless prattle” for Severus to focus on?” Minerva asked in disbelief.
“Yes.”
“Why haven’t you done it?”
“We have, but I don’t think our voices create the same effect as a living person…”
“Of course not,” said McGonagall dryly. If the portraits could have handled things without her they would have already done so and not brought Severus’ absence to her attention… “So you want me to talk to an empty frame?”
“Yes. Preferably up close so you can be better heard…”
“Seriously?”
“Yes.”
“For how long?”
“As long as possible,” Albus told her. “And as often as you can. We know nothing about the buzz—when it started, or how long it was happening before Severus noticed and started complaining…”
Minerva rolled her eyes. “You had better be right about this!” she told Albus. Minerva drew out her wand and pointed it at Severus’ empty frame. “Wingardia Leviosa!” she commanded. The frame lifted off the wall and floated gently to her desk. Minerva propped the frame up on the desk making sure it wouldn’t slide. “And there had better be total secrecy about all of this!” she warned. “If anyone ever found out I was reading to an empty frame, let alone the frame of Severus Snape, I’ll be dismissed for sure!!!”
“Of course.” Albus’ portrait drew back in his seat but not before Minerva caught a smothered smirk on his face and a glint in his eye. Minerva was certain she was about to become the object of many a bit of portrait humour… But if this worked, if she could, in some way, help get the students back, the humiliation would be worth it.
Minerva pulled out the addition of the *Prophet* she had just received that morning and opened it up. “Oh, look!” she said with artificial enthusiasm directing her voice at the empty frame. “There’s a notice in the *Prophet* stating that Wizard Pilkington is looking for a suitable location to hold his annual charity ball. It’s to be held outdoors this year,” she continued reading aloud. “Apparently there was some glitch with the Muggle security measures in the building they used last year...”
Chapter 20

Dear Grandmum,
Guess what! I got high scores on all my latest assignments. I will be going on a long walk to celebrate once the weather clears…

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Dear Grandmum,
We are all busy getting ready for a huge Halloween party. It should be a lot of fun…”

**********

“Wherever you are, whatever you are, we remember you James and Lily Potter and wish you well.” Rose Weasley lifted her candle, lit it and placed it next to the candle Albus had already lit and placed under the photo that usually showed smiling faces of James and Lily Potter. The group photo didn’t move as it should but somewhere within were the smiling faces of James and Lily Potter.

Albus had led the family memorial ceremony this year. Holly Wycliff lit her candle and placed it next to Rose’s. Lily and Hugo lit theirs as well. It felt weird doing the ceremony without James to lead, weird doing it in a darkened room still filled with beds and weirder still even going to it; Holly had missed the ceremony the last two years. But somehow it seemed important to maintain traditions as much as possible in H2.

When someone counting the days had mentioned that Halloween was approaching, the suggestion was made to put on a celebration of some sort as was usually done at Hogwarts. The Charms class agreed to do the decorating. Holly agreed to have her cooking class fix something special for the evening (the kitchen had finally refreshed a couple of times so there was food again… The rain hadn’t stopped but at least there was more food.) Again, Holly insisted everyone had to participate somehow to get a share.

The prospect of new foods and entertainment for Halloween had kept everyone going while the rain kept falling. Funny, how it never flooded, just rained. Sometimes Holly wondered where all the extra water went, but not too long. She had other things to work on…

Lulu’s pen, dubbed Lulu’s Greenhouse, was finally completely covered over with glass and protected from the rain. At some point they would have to worry about watering, but not now. Still without a wand, Basu ruled Lulu’s Greenhouse like a queen. She had her students make the grapes spread their vines up high overhead and thicken making the frame for the roof. The vines wrapped around the redwood tree in the middle of the orchard making an airtight seal. The vines were anchored against the wall and then cut at the base to keep them from growing more. Glass panes were carefully inserted between the vines and finished with a waterproof grout one of the Hufflepuffs designed.

The moths were painstakingly transported to the orchard by use of the bubble headed charm. Bubble after bubble filled with moths was removed from the stairwell and released in the orchard. Pollination and harvesting had begun again in earnest replenishing depleted stores.

The pumpkin seeds from the ripe pumpkins in Hagrid’s garden had grown. Basu ordered the tables, counters and benches in Greenhouse 1 removed and turned into box planters. Then she had students transplant Hagrid’s entire garden into the box planters. (This was easier than trying to slop mud over the existing ground within the Greenhouse.) Besides pumpkins, the students now had mature cabbages, potatoes, onions, beets, carrots, and turnips! Yes, they had had cabbage before, carefully culled from the coleslaw and rinsed to make something new. They’d had carrots, beets and onions too, picked out of prepared foods and salads from the kitchen and set aside for future use, but
never before had they had the actual items independent of kitchen supplies, something that could be
grown and used. Basu’s students got seeds, cuttings, tops, and whatever else it took to get the root
crops to reproduce and grow more!

Winky practically wept with joy at the prospects of new foods to work with… Pumpkin seeds
were much easier to collect and grind into flour than knotgrass and scurvy grass seeds. Of course,
they had to be shelled first. And they had potato flour too!

The celebration was held in the Great Hall. Carved lit pumpkins floated overhead (courtesy of
Michael Goldstein’s (R6) pumpkin carving class.) (The carved pumpkins would all be carefully
collected at the end of the party and cooked the next day.) Black and orange moths fluttered gently
between the floating Jack-O-lanterns. The food got rave reviews from everyone. Becky’s singing
class/choir performed several pieces. Bernard Bletchley (S7) collected the idle students and put
together a production of Macbeth with his girlfriend Martina Goyle as the Lady Macbeth. There
were lots of sword fights interspersed between witches and ghosts. Almost every actor was
guaranteed a fight or a great death scene… Everyone enjoyed the performance immensely.

When it ended Holly slipped out with her cousins for their private family memorial ceremony.
When they finished, the five stepped outside the Memorial room. Head Boy Jeremy Corner was right
outside leaned casually up against the Defense Against the Dark Arts Classroom door that was
across from the Last Battle Painting and the Memorial Room.

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“Holly? May I have a moment with you?” questioned Jeremy Corner.
Holly looked apprehensively at him a moment before speaking. She always looked that way
around him, probably because he was practicing Occlumency. Jeremy wished he could reassure
Holly some way that he was who he was but he didn’t know how.

“It’s late,” Holly reminded Jeremy. “Maybe later…”

“No,” refused Jeremy knowing Holly was good at coming up with excuses if she wanted.
“We should talk now… It’s kind of important,” he added. “It shouldn’t take long,” he promised.
“Perhaps we could talk while you walk back to your dorm…” Such that it was… Then Jeremy
waited. Holly was usually pretty reasonable and he knew better than to try to push her into anything.

After a moment, Holly nodded her head. “O.K.,” she said aloud with obvious reluctance. “I’ll
see you later,” she told her cousins. They nodded and took off, presumably towards their “dorm”
located at the base of the Gryffindor tower.

“Winston D’Airelle’s wrist was much better today,” Jeremy told Holly when the Potter clan
had turned the corner.

“That’s good,” answered Holly warily.

“How’s Shipley?” There was no point in keeping the two in the “infirmary” where it was
gloomy and dark when both could be better cared for with and by members of their own houses…

“She’s doing better too,” Holly replied. The Hufflepuffs had brought her out on a chair to
enjoy the festivities.

“That’s good,” said Jeremy. “I was worried,” he admitted.

“Me too,” acknowledged Holly.

“What’d you give them?”


Jeremy waited. It hadn’t taken much to find out Holly had given Winston something new to
try; Jeremy had just asked him.

“Just something I, ah, mixed together that I thought might help…”

“You mixed it?” questioned Jeremy.

“Yes, of course I did,” assured Holly. “Who else?”

That was the problem. “How did you come up with that … particular mixture?” questioned
Jeremy. Winston had shown it to Jeremy. It looked like mostly hot water with leaves and stuff
floating in it, more of a tea than a potion. It hadn’t the greatest taste, but didn’t seem harmful…
“It, ah, just sort of came to me…”
“...In a dream?” Dreams were one way a Dark Wizard could enter someone else’s mind and influence people...
“What? No!” exclaimed Holly emphatically. “I practice my Occlumency every night just to make sure something like that doesn’t happen!”
“Oh, huh…” Jeremy said with disbelief. He knew there had been days, especially when all the Slytherins were so sick, that Holly had been so tired she had practically collapsed in exhaustion. (They’d all had.) And then there were the times Holly was trying to commit suicide…
“Well, mostly,” amended Holly, “but this was no dream idea!”
“It wasn’t yours either,” informed Jeremy calmly. “You’re good at a lot of things, Holly, but not at mixing potions.”
“I can mix potions!” she argued.
“Mix, yes,” agreed Jeremy, “but not create… What you gave Winston is something totally new. Who gave you the recipe?” he persisted.
“No one!” denied Holly emphatically.
Jeremy sighed. “We’ve been here over two months Holly and have never seen a sign of a kidnapper,” he reminded her. “But that doesn’t mean the kidnapper isn’t here amongst us working quietly towards his ends, whatever they are… What better way to gain your trust and support than to pass on a little something to help you out, help us out?”
“What? No! This isn’t the kidnapper’s idea!” denied Holly. “I would never!!!”
“To save someone else? Yes, of course you would,” argued Jeremy. “Sir proved that with those tests he made you do.” Holly never talked about her experiences with Sir but Jeremy had read that interview in the Prophet; it was pretty easy to read between the lines and guess the kind of things Sir had done to get Holly’s cooperation… “The fact you are working so hard to conceal the identity of the person who gave you the potion recipe is even more concerning—that’s exactly how a dark wizard would work. You’re in deep, Holly and being manipulated,” Jeremy told her.
“No I’m not!” denied Holly. “It isn’t like that at all!”
“Then what is it?”
“They needed help and… it’s nothing dark! I swear!”
“I wish I could believe that,” replied Jeremy solemnly. “But you’ve been skipping off into our passageway alone and other hiding places every day for over a week now. A change in behavior is the first red flag they tell us to look for… And knowledge! Possession of knowledge and skills above what one would normally expect—that’s another red flag!” Holly sniffed and gulped guiltily. She looked down and started twisting the hem of her shirt this way and that.
“How did you get the recipe?” repeated Jeremy. Holly continued to twist the shirt violently without answering. “You know me, Holly, and what I’m studying to become… “ Jeremy reminded. Holly had joined in their defense practices and was one of the few students there who knew Jeremy was planning to be an auror. “I can’t stand by and let something like that happen to you, to us, without trying to stop it.”
“It’s not the kidnappers and it’s nothing dark!” repeated Holly firmly. “But I swore to not tell…”
“And that’s another red flag,” he told her. “Or could be,” he amended gently. Jeremy took Holly by the shoulders and turned her body so it was facing his. “Well intentioned promises given to the wrong person are a way to be sucked in by a dark wizard,” Jeremy told Holly. “It happened all the time during the days of Lord Voldemort. I’ll keep your secret Holly,” he added, “but I have to know that secret won’t destroy us all…”
There were tears streaming down Holly’s face. She sniffed, wiped her face off with a sleeve and gave the faintest of nods. Then she turned and started walking towards the stairs.
Jeremy followed Holly silently as she made her way up the stairs sensing if he spoke more, her tenuous agreement would be rescinded. Holly led him up to the fifth floor to the Hufflepuff dorm.
“Wait here,” she told him when they reached the dorm entrance, a blue sheet with the words “Hufflepuff dorm” written on it with yellow moth wings that hung down from the ceiling, blocking
Jeremy waited while Holly vanished behind the sheet. She returned after a few minutes carrying her black and yellow Hufflepuff bag. Without a word Holly started back down the corridor towards the stairs. Jeremy followed. She walked down the stairs to the fourth floor, turned off and headed towards the library.

Holly entered the library and went straight to the librarian portrait. The Librarian turned her stern face towards the two and readjusted her glasses as she looked down upon Holly. “What is 1/4 ruby, 2/5 aventurine, 2/11 clinohumite, 1/8 amethyst and 1/9 wulfenite?” she asked.

Holly looked at the librarian blankly. “Uh…” Then she looked at Jeremy for help. “I don’t even know what most of those words mean!” she whispered.

Jeremy rolled his eyes. “Ravenclaw!” he answered. It was an easy question. Jeremy looked at Holly and noted her still blank face. “First letter of ruby, aventurine has ten letters so instead of 2/5 it would be 4/10 or the first four letters, first two letters of clinohumite, first letter of amethyst and first letter of wulfenite. Together they all spell "Ravenclaw." All those words were different kinds of gems,” he added.

“Well reasoned,” said the librarian proudly and the portrait frame swung open. The Librarian wasn’t working properly. She might have opened the frame even had Holly given the wrong answer. She certainly shouldn’t have been talking to Holly, a Hufflepuff, in the first place and the third year Ravenclaw students had reported the questions the Librarian asked were all questions they had gotten the previous year.

“Thank you,” said Holly and she stepped into the passage beyond. Jeremy followed. The portrait swung shut behind them.

“Lumos!” said Holly softly.

Jeremy watched in amazement as Holly tucked the lit wand behind her ear and proceeded to set her bag down on the floor. “You could keep a wand lit while suspended from your ear?” he thought with surprise, “I never knew that was possible!!!” Jeremy knew Holly carried more than one wand but now he wondered, “Can Holly work two wands at once?”

Holly opened the bag and reached in. It was clearly an extendable bag. Her hand pulled out a huge frame. “I know you don’t want anyone to know about you,” she told the frame as she pulled. Jeremy lent his hand and helped her pull the frame out as she continued to talk. “But Jeremy here thinks you’re a dark wizard or something…” Jeremy helped Holly lean the portrait up against the wall so he could get a better look.

Jeremy recognized the sallow grim face with black hair and eyes that stared back at him; a similar portrait hung on the wall in McGonagall’s office. That meant it was of a Headmaster, though Jeremy didn’t know the name… “You found this painting in your bag?” he questioned while wondering why Holly sat back and seemed to look at the painting with such reverence.

“No! I brought it with me, of course,” answered Holly serenely.

“Why?” Jeremy stopped there. Why did Holly carry about a painting of a headmaster in her bag? Why did she bring it to school when there was already a painting in the Headmistress’ office? Why did she even have a painting of any sort in her bag?

“I take him with me wherever I go,” Holly told him.

“Why?”

“Headmaster Snape is my hero!” Holly’s face seemed to glow as she spoke. Snape!? Wasn’t that like, one of the worst Headmasters ever? “Why?” questioned Jeremy aloud.

“He saved me!” Holly said with adoration.

“Headmaster Snape is dead,” Jeremy said bluntly. That much he knew with certainty. He’d been dead long before Holly was ever born!

“Yes,” agreed Holly sorrowfully, “but he saved me anyway. He watches over me, always—even here!”

Seriously weird! “Yes, well, what does that have to do with potions?” questioned Jeremy aloud determined to not get sidetracked.
“The Headmaster helped me,” Holly replied.

Jeremy stared again at the portrait, the grim unmoving face, turned up lip and glittering black eyes. “You telling me he gave you the recipe?” he asked aloud in disbelief.

“Yes.”

“It’s a still!” protested Jeremy. “It can’t tell you anything!” Living portraits were horribly expensive and difficult to have made. That Holly would actually own a living portrait was beyond comprehension!

“Of course it’s not a still!” answered Holly reprovingly. “He’s just playing Muggle for you,” she told Jeremy. “That’s what he said he’d do if I told anyone about him,” Holly added explaining. “The Headmaster is very proud,” continued Holly. She leaned over and whispered in Jeremy’s ear, “I think he’s rather embarrassed to have found a way here and not be able to get back!”

“So you’re saying this … portrait … just told you what to do to make Winston and Shipman all better?”

“You make it sound easy,” exclaimed Holly. “It wasn’t all that easy. I had to make a list of every single thing in this place that could be used as an ingredient—food, spice, potion supplies, everything! And he said there wasn’t anything proper to do the job so he’d have to think up something new…”

Jeremy felt his blood turn cold as Holly spoke. “You’ve just told some stranger the entire extent of our food supplies!” he said keeping his voice low and quiet. This was serious, real serious.

“No I didn’t!” argued Holly. “I told the Headmaster!”

Jeremy looked again at the portrait, the still, unmoving portrait. He took a deep breath. “Did it never occur to you that some dark wizard might figure out your … fascination … with Headmaster Snape … and use it to his advantage?”

“No!” Holly whispered.

“He animated this portrait you carry of him and made you think the Headmaster was actually talking to you…”

“No! It’s the Headmaster!” she exclaimed. “He’s also a potions master!” Holly continued. “A potions genus!” she assured him. “Who else could think up something out of the stuff we have to help Riley and Winston!”

Jeremy shook his head. “It’s the Kidnappers using Snape’s painting to tell you what you want to hear,” he told Holly. “The Kidnappers probably transfigured some bone fixing ingredients into something ordinary, put them where you would be sure to find them, and then had you use the items to make your stuff.” guessed Jeremy. “Oh, Holly, what have you done?”

“How dare you suggest I would ever use any item polluted through transfiguration in one of my creations!” snapped the head in the portrait.

Jeremy looked at the head in surprise.

“Nor can any … kidnapper use some animation spell to make me do or say anything I do not wish!” continued the head with a sneer. “That can only be done with stills and I am not a still! Is this the kind of tripe they are teaching you in auror class? I must have a talk with McGonagall about that when we get back!”


“Of course I talk!” retorted the Headmaster acidly. “And if you ever suggest a word of that to anyone I shall relate the conversation you had with McGonagall during the summer about becoming Head Boy!” he threatened. “So it’s helping?” the Headmaster asked turning his attention to Holly.

“Oh, yes, sir,” reported Holly. “The fever’s gone down and staying down and the wrist and hip bones feel all tingly now.”

“That’s the bone beginning to heal,” the Headmaster told Holly. “Tell them to keep drinking a spoonful every hour until there’s no more pain, even through the night…”

“Yes, sir,” said Holly cheerfully.

“Can you remember how to make more when they need it?”

“Yes sir,” answered Holly promptly. “I’ve written down the instructions exactly as you said and set all the ingredients aside so we won’t run out. We really need to name it, though,” she added,
“they’ve been asking. What do you want to call it?”

The Headmaster scowled. His lips curled up in a disdainful sneer. “It’s not a proper potion,” he told Holly. “It’s more of a—”

“Tea,” blurted Jeremy remembering what he’d seen and still trying to take in what was happening. He had practiced his Occlumency every day faithfully even when too exhausted to think. While a dark wizard/kidnapper might have gotten in Holly’s mind to create/animate this portrait, Jeremy couldn’t believe that same person had found his/her way into his mind. There was no other way that kidnapper would have known and been able to mention that very private meeting he’d had with McGonagall in her office about Richards that summer… Only the portraits had been there to listen in. That meant that somehow the living portrait of Headmaster Snape was really here!

“Tea?” questioned Holly. “That’s kind of plain and unpretentious. Yeah, sure, it’s steeped and brewed, but maybe something like Helpful, or, For Bones would be better for a name…”

The Headmaster scowled again. “Tea, will do,” he told her.

“Tea it is,” agreed Holly happily.

**********

“Do the Hufflepuffs know about the, uh, Headmaster?” questioned Jeremy Corner as they walked back to the Hufflepuff dorm.

“About the portrait? Sure,” answered Holly easily. “We tried it ages ago after I was, uh, thinking more clearly. But no one was there and it never answered; it was just a blank frame. We’d given up on it. And then, one day, he was just, there! It never occurred to me that someone else might have used my memories to put him there!”

“It should have!” Jeremy told her reprovingly. “You, of all people should know how sneaky a dark wizard can be!”

“Sir wasn’t like this at all,” Holly told him. “Proud, yes, and sneaky—devilishly sneaky, but when he had me, he wanted me to know and bow to his superiority.” They reached the landing and started up the stairs when Holly said, “No,” she corrected herself. “Sir would have done exactly what you described with the portrait, had he known about the Headmaster and what he meant to me. Well,” Holly she amended, “he did know about the Headmaster and that he was important, but not who he was—I’d have been crushed had Sir used my memories, animated the Headmaster and used him against me!”

Causing Jeremy to ponder exactly what memories Holly had of the Headmaster that could have been used… “You probably would have never known,” Jeremy told Holly aloud. “You would have just done what the Headmaster told you to do like you did here.” What would Sir have animated? Did Holly have the Headmaster portrait when Sir had captured her? Could he have found some way to force the Headmaster to assist or had Holly some other picture, a still, that Sir could have animated? They reached the fifth floor and turned off the steps.

“That’s a scary thought,” acknowledged Holly. “I’m glad it’s the real Headmaster and not some manipulated memories of him here.”

“It may still be,” warned Jeremy. “I mean I’ve done my Occlumency every night and stuff, but honestly, I have no idea what it’s like to have someone comb through my mind for memories. Perhaps the kidnapper got to both of us!” Holly shivered visibly. “I think it’s highly unlikely,” Jeremy continued thoughtfully. “But it’s still a possibility. I want you to keep me informed of what goes on between you and the Headmaster, just in case. O.K.?”

“Yes, sir,” said Holly meekly.

“And you should tell Woods, too,” continued Jeremy, meaning Head Girl and Hufflepuff Jennifer Woods. “She can keep a secret if she has to,” Jeremy reminded Holly. “If I can notice a difference in your behavior then she surely has too. No doubt all of the Hufflepuffs have. You’ve been positively cheerful lately, Holly. Secretive and cheerful,” he told her. “Knowing what I know now, it’s probably because of your conversations with the Headmaster,” continued Jeremy. How could someone so grim and angry make Holly so happy? “Without knowing that, however, the
Hufflepuffs are probably really worried sick about you about now and wondering if you've cooked up some new way to kill yourself—Goldstein removed that noose you had hidden in the rafters of the Great Hall, by the way,” Jeremy added. “Are there any more of those around?” Jeremy looked at Holly hopefully for an answer. Holly looked steadfastly at the floor. There was a hint of red creeping up her neck, but she didn’t say anything. That meant there probably were… He’d alert Woods about that… “Suicide is not the answer, Holly,” he told her. “You’re blinding yourself from other possibilities…”

“Yes, sir,” Holly whispered softly. “So they say. But I don’t see them, the possibilities, not any more…”

“And you would have missed the Headmaster’s return,” Jeremy reminded. The presence of a Headmaster, even as a portrait, was positively exhilarating to Jeremy! It meant that now they had access to the knowledge of all sorts of spells not usually available to students. Maybe one of those spells could get them out! Snape supposedly worked with Lord Voldemort; perhaps he knew something of the people capable of doing such a thing… Could he get Holly to ask Snape?

“Not all possibilities are foreseeable, not immediately,” Jeremy told Holly. "We’re going to get out of here, Holly,” Jeremy promised. “All of us! Just you wait.”

“Yes, sir,” Holly agreed, but she didn’t sound convinced.

They reached the Hufflepuff dorm entrance. Prefect Huckaby was seated just outside the Hufflepuff sheet. She looked up with obvious relief at their arrival. “It’s real late,” she told them. “We were getting worried…” Probably not about the hour…

“We got to talking and forgot the time,” Jeremy said apologetically. “Sorry about that. It occurs to me we should start up a dueling club,” he added to Huckaby. “Maybe it’d be a good way to hone up on our defensive skills. What do you think?”

“Uh, yeah, I suppose,” said Huckaby thrown off by the change in subject.

“Great. You’ll mention it at the next prefect meeting, will you? Thanks.” Jeremy liked to keep a low profile at the meetings. “See you later, Wycliff,” he added pleasantly and left for his own dorm, or what served as their dorm, located at the base of the Ravenclaw tower.

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**Dear Grandmum,**

*I had a lovely Halloween party. The decorations were very spooky. The food was great and everyone had a good time…*

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“Any news?” asked Harry Potter hopefully.

“The parents have reported Shipley and D’Airelle have recovered,” answered Dean.

“That’s good,” said Harry.

“Yes, for a while they were worried their children were getting worse, but now it seems their stones are looking much better…”

“Well, that’s something,” Harry said. The missing Headmaster Snape portrait was something too, but exactly what, no one knew so there was no point in mentioning it. His absence was nothing that would help them and Phineas had specifically requested it not be discussed aloud or in writing for fear the kidnappers would learn….

“Yes,” agreed Dean. “Oh, I’ve something for you,” he said and reached into his pocket.

“Wizard Pilkington dropped these by for you and Ginny.”

“What are they?”

“Tickets to his Annual Ball…”

“He’s really holding it?” Harry asked in disbelief. How could anyone think of a Ball at a time like this?

“Yes, but there’s no charge for parents… He said it’s something to take our mind off of …
other matters…” Dean’s voice trailed off. Pilkington had two children missing… What must it cost him to try to carry on with business as usual…

“Thank you,” said Harry gravely while taking the tickets. A Ball wouldn’t bring back their children but Pilkington was right; he and Ginny needed the diversion…

**********
Dear Grandmum,

It snowed last night. Everything is beautiful and white. We had a huge snowball fight before breakfast.

**********

“There’s snow!” announced a voice in the dorm.
“What!!!” Anthony Richards shot out of bed. His worst fears realized! How bad was it?
Anthony grabbed his robe and, like the rest of the students, hurried to the entrance. He looked out the huge double doors. A thick layer of sparkly white covered everything. It looked both beautiful and scary.

“Least it’s not rain!” whispered one of the Hufflepuffs.
“True,” agreed Anthony mentally. Day in and day out, never ceasing rain! It had gotten on everyone’s nerves.

The only one who had shined during the rain was Bernard Bletchley (S7.) His fire setting skills had become welcomed indeed when the Great Hall fire had died and they had run out of firewood. The Ravenclaw stores of firewood had of course been removed and carefully set aside each day the place refreshed, as was the wood in the Great Hall, but it rained more than things had refreshed and all of that had eventually run out. The wood cut from the forest outside didn’t burn properly. Bletchley took the huge tables and benches from outside (moved there for the Quidditch banquet and left once the rain began) used Diffendo to break them all up into usable sizes and set the table pieces all on fire during the rain. He burned all the extra doors removed from their frames too. Then he and his friends had painstakingly gotten the tables moved out of the Great Hall each night on the off chance things would refresh giving them extra wood to burn… Of course, they didn’t need the fires to keep warm, a bunch of spells taught to everyone in the charms classes did that; having a real fire in the fireplace was more a psychological thing.

“We need to check the orchard,” Anthony said aloud. It should be OK but then again… He turned.

“Where are you going?” questioned Fitzpatrick.

“To get dressed first,” answered Anthony. He wasn’t about to go tramping about in the snow without proper clothing on first. That had been a big mistake when the rain had started. It was a major hassle to get his clothes all dried out afterwards. “Meet you all back here in 10, no 15 minutes and then we can check things together…” he told the group.

Fifteen minutes later Anthony reappeared dressed for the cold complete with a blue hat, scarf and mittens…

When Corwin and Adderson realized the rain wasn’t stopping, they bartered for some Ravenclaw curtains and cut them down to scarf sizes. No one gave them a second glance. Fitzpatrick derisively said they should be “deconstructed” and “knitted” instead (whatever that meant.) Except Fitzpatrick didn’t know how to “knit…” Turned out Rose Weasley could. Apparently her mum used to knit a lot while at Hogwarts. Anthony couldn’t imagine why. Probably a Mudblood thing… Anyway, she had taught Rose for some reason…

What should have been a simple matter of a few easy lessons turned into a major negotiation situation when Albus Potter got wind of Corwin’s interest… Anthony wasn’t sure what happened between them but heard Adderson mutter later that he had no idea a “nutter” could strike such a hard bargain… “Perhaps he isn’t a “nutter,” suggested Anthony remembering what Wycliff had said…

Afterwards, knitting needles went on sale, each spelled to make a single item of clothing. If a student wanted more, he had to go back to get more needles or a new/different spell cast on the needles he had… The yarn was for sale too, royal blue, always. Or a student could “deconstruct” his
or her own curtain after getting it from the Ravenclaws...

There was no one in the entryway waiting when Anthony returned. They were all—outside! Deep in a snowball fight! A stray snowball landed squarely on Anthony’s chest! An accident? Or deliberate! How could they be having “fun” at a time like this! Anthony brushed off the snow and his eyes found Corner in the act of throwing a snowball!

“Is this the best you can do as Head Boy!” he accused.

Corner straightened, met Anthony’s angry eyes and said simply, “yes.” A snowball shattered against Corner’s head sending a spray of snow everywhere. Corner turned and threw the snowball in his hand towards the culprit. Another snowball hit Anthony in the head!

“You’re not getting out the front entryway without getting hit by a snowball,” stated Pilkington in Anthony’s ear as he brushed off the snow. “I advise you to use these in defense…” She thrust a bag filled with what looked like perfectly shaped snowballs into Anthony’s hands and stepped away…

Anthony did use the snowballs. He hit that lazy no-account Corner and the smug full-of-himself Fitzpatrick and Potter and Weasley and Pilkington and O’Daniels and Finnegan and everyone else who had ever made a disparaging comment! It felt good to hit them—again and again! They got him too, sometimes, but somehow that didn’t matter.

Eventually Anthony made it to the Orchard. The roof had held firm and the trees within still had their summer leaves.

“They didn’t freeze with the change in weather,” informed Corner in Anthony’s ear. Anthony hadn’t even seen Corner arrive. Corner could move really silently when he wanted… “You did good,” Corner told him. “But I suggest we wait and begin pollination tomorrow. The kitchen’s refreshed. We can afford to take a break today…”

**********

“Thank you so much for coming to my Ball,” greeted Daniel Pilkington. “I’m so glad you could make it.”

“Thank you for inviting us,” said Mr. Potter, Harry. His wife Ginny managed a small smile and nodded her head in agreement with Harry. Her face was pale and make-up couldn’t hide the dark circles under her eyes.

“I’ve something for you and your wife,” added Daniel. He turned to the table next to him, removed a small cloth bag with a sparkly deep purple bow and handed it to Harry. He handed a second bag to the Weasleys, who had arrived with the Potters. “It’s some samples of Mrs. Crowley’s best potions,” Daniel told the group. “No charge, of course.” Paige had put together potion sample packets for the parents. Her selection was designed to alleviate the symptoms of worry and stress they were probably experiencing including stomach pains, headaches, muscle aches and pains, chest pains, lack of appetite, low energy, nausea, sleeplessness, and high blood pressure…

“Thank you,” said Harry gravely while taking the bag. He opened it, and looked inside.

“The Dreamless is pretty effective,” Daniel told them remembering how well the airborne version had worked the previous year. So were the other potions, but Daniel wouldn’t admit to having tried them, having the need to try them…

“That’s good to know,” agreed Harry neutrally but Daniel could tell from the set expressions on their faces they probably wouldn’t try the Dreamless.

Terika wouldn’t either—“What if you got some news and I was asleep?” she asked Daniel worriedly…

“Have a seat and relax a bit,” Daniel suggested. There was no point in asking a parent to “have fun.” “The refreshments are on the left and there’s an auction table is on the far back.”

On one corner of that auction table was a cauldron labeled “for the parents.” It was a donation bucket to be exclusively used for the needs of the parents—the specific purpose left undefined. Ransom? No one had yet mentioned receiving a ransom note… Reward upon their safe return? That hadn’t happened either… Legal perhaps? For a desperate parent caught using “dark” magic to try to
find them? No one had been prosecuted for that but Daniel had no doubt all sorts of questionable magic use was going on behind closed doors. Medical? Daniel had heard business at St. Mungo’s was unusually busy… Or, the unmentionable: funerals…

This year’s annual ball was not the usual gala event. It seemed totally grim in comparison to other years. The stars overhead glittered like frozen ice chips in keeping with the icy night. At least it wasn’t snowing as it had the last year around this time.

After the previous year’s “debauch,” Daniel had promised an outdoors event for the Ball. Paige Crowley suggested the location—on the coast, quiet, remote, with gardens and already well warded. Daniel didn’t know how she knew of the spot but it was perfect for his needs and required little modifications.

Torches lit the perimeter of the Ball. Heat spells offset the outside cold. Daniel placed a small dance floor in the middle of a cleared area in the garden and installed a small stage next to it for the live musical entertainment. The musicians were already seated and playing soft background music. There would be both slow and faster pieces, should someone wish to dance but Daniel doubted that would happen much tonight. He had set up tables and chairs throughout the garden and placed tiny bottles filled with fireflies on each table. The tables were small. People could sit in semi darkness, listen to the music, watch the fireflies and try to forget…

Overhead floated a circle of lit candles, 259 candles, one for each missing child and one for the missing witch who ran the trolley cart on the Hogwarts Express. The Express officials refused to release her name out of consideration for her family. Daniel knew the lady, of course, and had sent the family tickets, but respected the family’s desire for privacy. Daniel would never willingly subject the family to the ruthless persistence of Rita Skeeter from the Daily Prophet. She had relentlessly hounded the parents in quest of interviews, statements and photos. Rita had even hunted out Muggle parents to get their reactions and write her articles. Daniel had finally requested an injunction and filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of all the parents to get Rita to leave them alone. It had been impossible to get a restraining order against Rita, as there were just too many parents but a compromise was reached where Rita no longer bothered those who did not seek her out first.

Two of the 258 candles represented Daniel’s own dear Dylan and Leila. Terika’s Healthstone indicated they were both alive and well. But Holly’s Healthstone had shown perfect health while Sir had mentally tormented her. Daniel shuttered to think of the mental terrors his two babies might even now be enduring...

Daniel was confident of the intellect of his children; surely the two together could work their way out of any problem… That’s what all the Ravenclaws thought and still their children did not come home… Their failure to return didn’t bode well. There had to be some reason for it; a reason the Ravenclaws did not share with the other parents, especially those without Healthstones who clung to the belief that the students were together and collectively “O.K.” If they were together, they surely would have come home. Therefore, they could not be together…

An extension of that logic meant the children whose parents had no Healthstones could even now all be dead and no one would know! That was an idea too horrible to contemplate. So Daniel kept his worst fears to himself. He smiled and nodded at parental attempts to reassure each other that their children were together, all in good health, and hoped his other thoughts were just the product of an overactive imagination…

Daniel kept the smile plastered on his face throughout the evening as he greeted guest after guest. When most of the people had arrived, Daniel made his usual welcoming speech encouraging guests to have a “good time” managing to not mention what was foremost on everyone’s mind. Then he circulated to see if his guests needed anything. There was a respectable attendance this year. Most of that was due to the complimentary tickets Daniel had passed out to parents. Daniel hadn’t made the usual promotional efforts this year. His heart just hadn’t been in it. Mostly, Daniel and Terika had organized the Ball as a way to keep busy, to keep their minds off … other things.

While he circulated, Daniel also kept an eye on Rita Skeeter to make sure she didn’t turn her camera or poison pen on any of the parents. Yes, that meant himself, too, and it was his party, but Daniel was adamant that no one’s grief and pain be made public, not at his event. Rita didn’t object
too much to his request. She could afford to be polite; she had already sold numerous papers by featuring grieving parents who had made open appeals to the kidnappers to return their children. But nothing had come of those appeals. With no new leads, the missing Hogwarts students had fallen to the back page; it was “old news” now.

Eventually, the evening ended. It had been a peaceful, uneventful night. The food and music had been good; some people even danced; most didn’t. But there were no quarrels, no fights, no *Imperius Curse*, no *Lunacy* or unexpected party crashers. That was a good thing, wasn’t it? It meant his security had improved, didn’t it? Or did it just mean the kidnapper was too busy with all his other victims to worry about interrupting Daniel’s Ball.

**********

“Thanks for letting me know,” said Kenneth Kevala Perkins over his cellphone. “No, don’t worry about it,” he added reassuringly. “I’ll work something out; it’ll be fine…”

“What’ll be fine?” asked his roommate and friend Vernon curiously. Vernon, Miranda and Kenny were sitting casually in his room. Vernon was in the middle of repairing a computer, which in this case, meant waiting for a program to download… He was playing a game on his phone while he waited. Miranda was reading a book and Kenny, well, he had been on the phone with his parents…

“There’s a problem back home,” began Kenny hesitantly. He didn’t like sharing his family problems. “My parents can’t afford to bring me back during the Holidays…” he added. “Do you think the Headmaster will let me stay at Smeltings?”

“You can stay with me,” offered Vernon promptly.

“At your home?” Kenny asked.

“Sure.”

“Oh, no!” Kenny exclaimed quickly. “I couldn’t do that!”

“Why not? There’s plenty of room. I’m sure my parents wouldn’t mind…”

“But, Holly!”?

“What about Holly?” questioned Miranda.

“What about her?” said Vernon. “My parents would probably be glad of the distraction…”

“What about Holly?” asked Miranda again.

“You sure?” asked Kenny worriedly. “I wouldn’t want to intrude…”

“Course I’m sure!” answered Vernon confidently. “Like I said, they’d probably welcome the distraction. I know I will…”

“What about Holly!” demanded Miranda closing her book with a loud snap showing she meant business.

Both Vernon and Kenny looked at Miranda guiltily. “Uh…”

“Well?”

Kenny looked at Vernon making it clear he wouldn’t say anything…

“Uh, she’s missing…” Vernon finally answered reluctantly.

“What! Since when?”

“Uh, since September?”

“And you never said anything?”

“It, uh, never came up,” Vernon said in a small voice.

“Seriously?” questioned Miranda in disbelief. “How could you keep something like that from me? What happened?”

“She never made it to school,” stated Kenny remembering that day Mr. Potter had come to Smeltings and told Vernon the news.

“What do you mean never made it to school? Didn’t your parents drop her off like they did you?”

“No.”

“They put her on a train,” explained Kenny. “And she never arrived…” “Along with a whole bunch of other students…” he added silently.
“That’s terrible! What did the police say?”
“Nothin’,” mumbled Vernon. Kenny was fairly certain the police knew nothing of the disappearance. Not the usual police, anyway…

“That’s impossible! They probably don’t think a missing persons case is worth their time and effort! What are your parents doing about it? Have they hired a detective?”

“Huh? Uh, no.”
“You mean they just waiting around for the police to do their job?”
“Uh, kind of…”
“Well, that clearly hasn’t worked,” she concluded aloud. “What about you?”
“Me? What do you mean?”
“I mean, she’s your sister! What are you doing to find her?”
“Uh…”
“You’ve got a computer!” Miranda added. “We’ve got the internet; post some pictures! We could do our own investigating! We could also hire a detective. I’ll help with the cost if that’s what’s stopping you.”

“What about Greg?” she continued.


“Have you told him? You haven’t?” concluded Miranda aloud after seeing Vernon’s expression. “He should be told too, don’t you think? How could you leave him out of something as important as this?” she accused. “He could help look for her!”

“Oh! He must be that drunk who ran over Holly!” Kenny decided. “So that’s what his name is. Vernon’s never said his actual name before…”

“Uh, I don’t want to talk about it!” Vernon suddenly exploded and charged out of the room.

Miranda blinked in surprise. “It’s his sister,” she repeated softly. “He should be doing something…” She looked at Kenny seeking his agreement.

Kenny cleared his throat knowing he was expected to respond and not knowing what he could say. “Um, there’s a few things you don’t know about Vernon,” he began cautiously. “Maybe a lot of things,” he corrected himself. “If you wait long enough, perhaps he’ll tell you about them,” Kenny added. “Or not,” Kenny continued honestly suspecting he’d only heard the tip of the iceberg. “But if there was any way Vernon thought a simple facebook posting or a detective could help find Holly don’t you think he’d be doing it?” Vernon was, actually, but that was one of those things Kenny couldn’t talk about.

Holly had apparently turned up in some sanitarium last year with amnesia… So Mr. Potter had acquired photos and descriptions of the missing students, changed their names, and gotten Vernon to quietly post them as “runaways, last seen in London heading to Scotland…” That disposable phone charging by Vernon’s bed would connect to anyone calling to report sightings. No one had called. With Mr. Potter’s help, Vernon was also using his computer to monitor the admissions of “unidentified” youths into hospitals and morgues. No one matching the description of any student had been reported. That was probably a good thing considering the places Vernon was monitoring but “no news” was very disheartening.

Vernon had done more than just monitor reports. He remembered how alone he had felt when he thought Holly was dead and knew what the other families, especially the siblings, were going through. So Vernon had taken that Taxi card Mr. Potter had given him and called up “Stan.” Stan contacted someone named “Rupert.” Rupert had gotten Vernon the names and contact numbers of the non-witch/wizard brothers and sisters of the missing students. Using that list Vernon had started a very special internet support group, by invitation only. Kenny would wake up late at night to the sound of Vernon tapping away on the keyboard to members of the other families. It had helped
Vernon a lot to be able to express things; Kenny hoped it helped the other families too.

Vernon reported his worries and stress weren’t nearly as bad as some of the other participants. There were families out there with missing children who knew even less of the witch/wizard world than Vernon. So Vernon wrote about how Mr. Potter had brought Holly back from the “dead” and tried to reassure the parents that, though he didn’t know about the rest, he was certain Mr. Potter was definitely doing everything possible to find their children and bring them home, all of them...

“If you’re really Vernon’s friend,” Kenny continued aloud. “Perhaps you should be asking how you could help instead of telling Vernon what he should do...” Miranda looked at Kenny thoughtfully. “Vernon usually goes to the track field when he needs to think,” Kenny added helpfully. Vernon used to like the weight room until Montague used that weight lifting stunt… Then Vernon spent his spare time hanging out at the library, but not after he learned the Librarian, Mr. Ballytwirk, had actually been “Sir” in disguise...

“You could bring him his coat,” Kenny suggested. It was icy outside and Vernon had charged off without taking it.

Miranda nodded silently. She stood, grabbed Vernon’s coat and left the room...

**********

**Dear Grandmum,**

*The snow is so beautiful. We are having a bonfire tonight with hot chocolate for everyone...*

**********

“Do you think you could talk a bit with Poppy MacNair (S2)?” questioned Wycliff. “She’s feeling a bit depressed...”

“You’re the Empath,” protested Anthony Richards. “You do it so much better than me...”

“You’re the Empath,” protested Anthony Richards. “You do it so much better than me...”

“Can’t,” argued Wycliff almost cheerfully. “I’d probably help!”

Anthony mentally sighed and rolled his eyes. That meant it was probably not just a depression, but something more suicidal in nature.

An aura of gloom had settled over H2 after the snowfall. The snowfall had turned Hagrid’s garden into an empty patch of ground. But it was no big deal as all of it was already in Greenhouse 1 and flourishing magnificently in huge box planters that filled the building. With food no longer such an issue, there was time to think of other things and the reality of being prisoners had sunk into the deepest levels of each student. Without counting the days, everyone knew it was time for the holidays, except, they wouldn’t be going home, wouldn’t be spending the holidays with their families... Perhaps would never, ever, see their families again... Even the most cheerful of students found it difficult to smile.

Wycliff complained everyone seemed more depressed than before... Anthony could believe that. He was often awakened in the middle of the night by the muffled sobs of the younger Slytherin students. More classes were held to keep everyone busy; attendance became mandatory. A Christmas Party was planned; the students cut down a tree and put it up in the center of the Entrance (it never reset.) Students were put to work making ornaments and other decorations, but there was still down time, time to reflect... Recently Wycliff had been mentioning potentially suicidal students to Anthony expecting him to somehow talk them out of it...

“After all, you talked me out of it,” she reminded him cheerfully. “No one else could do that!”

“Yeah, right.”

At least Anthony hadn’t had to make any other disastrous promises to “cheer” them up. But the conversations, encouraging and cheering up the other students, tended to drag Anthony down. Here he was, in charge of the whole school, and no one knew, no one who mattered. What was the
point to keeping everyone alive if they were going to be stuck in this prison forever! Forever seemed like such a long time that Anthony had begun to understand the attraction of ending it all…

**********
“We think we may have figured a way out of here!”
“What?!!!”
Pilkington’s announcement jolted Anthony Richards wide-awake. Was she serious? Yes, she looked serious. Was it possible? It had been ages since anyone had mentioned, “escape,” let alone seriously. Home and family, yes, but not actual escape. Anthony had given up asking about escape at the advisor and prefect meetings; the resulting “nothing” was too depressing to hear.
“It’s kind of a crazy idea, though,” Pilkington continued, “and we’ll need your help, everyone’s help, to confirm a few things first…”
“Like what?”

**********

Dear Grandmum,

It’s hard to keep my mind on schoolwork. Everyone is getting ready for the holidays…

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Three days later, three agonizing days, while they waited for the rooms to refresh, later, Anthony Richards stood with Leila Pilkington in the back of the Great Hall. This was essentially a Ravenclaw operation but Anthony would not lend his support without being personally present to observe the results.

The hall was cold, empty and quiet. All the tables had been moved to the orchard. If the hall refreshed, as did the kitchen, new tables would appear and the old ones would eventually be disassembled, used for wood projects and/or splintered and used as firewood. All the students were in the orchard too; they’d been camping out there for the last three days—an extension spell had been added to make sure there was enough room…

It was 5:55am. Five more minutes before they would know if this was a day when the rooms would refresh… Not 5:59 or 6:03 but 6:00 precisely. That was when the rooms had refreshed the previous times. Anthony had no idea anyone had been watching the clock while the Great Hall/kitchen refreshed, but they had. The Ravenclaws were apparently very observant. They had observed other things too, things they now wanted to check out and confirm…

5:58 … 59 … Anthony closed his eyes, drew out his whistle, took a deep breath preparing to blow the all-clear signal. No one would move until they heard that signal. The Ravenclaws were very particular and insistent. They were certain the Hall would again refresh and when it did, there must be no errors…

“Look!” whispered Pilkington.

Anthony opened his eyes and looked about. The room was again filled with tables and benches! A huge fire burned merrily in the fireplace, firewood lay stacked nearby. The Great Hall doors swung open and the unknown student walked in. Anthony swiftly returned the whistle to his pocket. No whistle meant the room had refreshed and, with the exception of a select few, everyone had to stay away from the castle... More specifically, they had to remain in the orchard where they wouldn’t risk touching anything.

The “help” the Ravenclaws wanted from Anthony started with intensive questions about that first evening at H2. A group of Ravenclaws, some of the older students including Corner and Pilkington, made Anthony recount every minute up to the time Longbottom disappeared. They’d already asked the Firsts the same questions and wanted Anthony’s perspective as well.

Yes, he had taken the boat with the Firsts. No, that oaf Hagrid hadn’t acknowledged his presence; Anthony had assumed he was being snubbed. Of course he hadn’t touched Hagrid! Why would he? The Firsts hadn’t either; they were all too scared... And no, he hadn’t touched
Longbottom before trying to tap him on the shoulder; that wouldn’t have been proper…

~~~~~~~~~~

“It’s got to be the touch!” concluded Nikita Kakkar (R7). “Definitely the touch!”

“Of course it was my touch that first night,” stated Anthony remembering what had happened when he had tried to touch Longbottom. “But what does that have to do with Nellie or getting out of here?”

No, they hadn’t determined who she was; the Ravenclaws had named the unknown student “Nellie.” It was easier than saying “mystery student” every time. Anthony had seen Nellie upon several occasions and had watched her vanish when no one was near… Touch clearly had nothing to do with it.

“No, they hadn’t determined who she was; the Ravenclaws had named the unknown student “Nellie.” It was easier than saying “mystery student” every time. Anthony had seen Nellie upon several occasions and had watched her vanish when no one was near… Touch clearly had nothing to do with it.

“Not just by you, by anyone!” answered Goldstein. “Somebody must have touched something that caused her to vanish. We just don’t know what. We need to let Nellie finish.”

“Nellie is obviously a student,“ stated Anthony. “She’s going to go to class!”

“That would be the logical assumption,” agreed Pilkington. “But will she? And which classes?”

“Nellie is the key so we must learn all we can about her,” stated Corner. “Time is running out,” he added leaning forward and looking Anthony directly in the eyes. “We’ve got to know for sure before we can act…”

That meant letting Nellie wander the Halls of H2 without being “touched.”

Beyond that, they wouldn’t explain anything. Anthony was certain it was all a waste of time; but with the promise of escape, plans went ahead to empty H2 in anticipation of Nellie’s arrival.

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Nellie stepped to the Ravenclaw table and sat down. She pulled out a book and again began to read. Anthony was watching this time; Nellie hadn’t been holding it or had taken it out of her pocket, the book just appeared in her hand. Nellie turned a few pages and then began to eat; the bowl materialized in front of her and a spoon appeared in her hand. She balanced her opened book with one hand and continued reading while she scooped food out of the bowl with her other.

Pilkington released a small pink book with sparkly blue flowers and a blue plumed quill that she had held tightly in her hand. The book opened and floated up stopping a bit above her elbow height to her right side and the quill began to rapidly write in the book. She was clearly recording her observations to report back to the rest of the Ravenclaws later.

“That looks like porridge,” observed Anthony helpfully.

“Turay tended to eat porridge for breakfast,” stated Pilkington in a calm voice as the quill continued to write. After turning several pages Nellie closed her book and rose from the table. “Six-forty five,” stated Pilkington as she continued to write in her book. Nellie turned and stepped out of the Great Hall.

“Don’t move!” warned Pilkington in a low voice while taking hold of her book.

Anthony remained in place watching. “Look!” he said after a moment while pointing to the
table. “The bowl, it’s gone!” And indeed, the bowl and spoon Nellie had left behind had vanished as it had never been there.

“Interesting,” murmured Pilkington. She opened her book again and the quill rapidly scratched out some more words. Strange how the page looked blank despite all the writing the quill had done. They stood silently in the Hall for another minute and then Pilkington said, “I think it is safe for us to move now,” and again took hold of her book and quill. They stepped between the tables and through the opened doors of the Great Hall.

“She went outside,” reported Winston D’Airelle (R1) quietly. D’Airelle was an Official Observer. He was stationed under the stairwell located in a place not likely to be used by Nellie. It was conceivable that Nellie would go places where she could not be followed without touching something. Students were stationed throughout H2 for just that reason. They came equipped with enough food for the day and would not leave their posts until Anthony blew his whistle.

The huge entrance doors remained open. Anthony peered through them. The carpet of snow outside sparkled with the morning sun. There were no tracks. “Don’t touch the doors,” instructed Pilkington. In theory, it wouldn’t affect things to touch something after Nellie left, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Anthony and Pilkington moved between the doors and slipped outside.

Two brooms (from Diagon Alley) with blue scarves, mittens, hats and coats hanging on the ends were leaned up against the wall. Anthony took one and handed the other to Pilkington. He put on the extra clothing, mounted his broom and rose in the air. Pilkington mounted hers and flew up next to Anthony. Then they flew towards the Greenhouses. The door to Greenhouse 2 swung shut as they arrived.

Albus Potter hovered overhead on his broom. Potter was the designated Outside Observer. Arguably the best on a broom, Potter was bundled well in anticipation of a day outside in the frigid cold air. (Scorpius still maintained he was better on a broom, but had graciously “let” Potter do it after he realized he’d have to stay outside in the cold all day, every day until this was over.) Potter’s presence over the Greenhouse confirmed that Nellie was indeed inside. Herbology was a first period subject for second year students. Pilkington again pulled out her book and began writing…

There had been a heated discussion on whether or not to empty the box planters out of Greenhouse 1. It amounted to a lot of extra, possibly unnecessary, work. Everyone agreed H2 seemed to be built upon the memories of a 2nd year student and a 2nd year student had no need to go to Greenhouse 1. In the end huge shelves were built in the walls of Lulu’s Greenhouse and all the box planters were moved onto them, “just in case.”

“She sat down in Turay’s seat,” Potter reported. He had been listening to the report of Observer Hugo Weasley (G3) from an Extendable Ear set up under the door. Pilkington wrote that down too…

Adderson and Corwin had brought in a supply of Weasley Extendable Ears for resale while at Hogwarts. They thought it would be a good way to see what various members of the other Houses were up to… The Ears were rapidly sold to the Gryffindors who then placed them at strategic locations as advance warnings for the arrival of the kidnappers… They now made it possible for the students to report on Nellie’s activities without others entering the room…

“There’s no Professor Longbottom, or anyone else in the room besides Nellie,” Potter added. That answered one of the key questions the Ravenclaws had about the Nellie image. The first night had included all the professors, would the Nellie recreations do so as well? Apparently not.

“She’s potting Devil’s Claws now,” Weasley stated through the extendable Ear. “We did that last year about this time,” H2’s construction was somehow connected with a second year student so 2nd year student observers (now 3rd year) were placed in each classroom Nellie was likely to visit… Pilkington’s quill continued to write.

Anthony pulled out his pasty and began to eat what passed for breakfast. He hadn’t been hungry earlier. “You sure you’ll be O.K. out here all day?” questioned Anthony while he nibbled on his pasty. The three were hovering over the Greenhouse. Anthony didn’t really care about the answer, but it was something to say while waiting for Nellie to leave. Potter’s task was one of the
most challenging, as it required he continue patrolling all day and not land on the snowy ground until the whistle was blown.  

“Course,” assured Potter cheerfully. His breath made a white cloud as he spoke. “I’ve several spots up high already scoped out where I can go if I need to take a flying break. And if I get really cold I can always return to Lulu’s to warm up. I’ll be fine,” he assured them.  

“She’s leaving,” Weasley announced suddenly.  

“Seven forty-five,” murmured Pilkington writing rapidly as the Greenhouse door opened and Nellie appeared. She wore a scarf and hat along with her school robes. The three, Anthony, Pilkington and Potter flew overhead as Nellie walked back to the castle. Her feet sank into the snow leaving footprints as she walked but the tracks smoothed out into untouched snow as soon as her foot lifted up to make the next step.  

Nellie entered the castle vanishing from sight. Anthony landed under the eaves and leaned his broom against the wall. Pilkington landed next to him. Potter waved and zoomed off. He was supposed to circle the castle and keep an eye out for any changes that might occur and would be otherwise unnoticed. Anthony and Pilkington removed their outer clothes and re-entered H2.  

“She headed towards classroom 1,” reported D’Airelle. That made sense; Transfiguration was taught there—just not at 8:00am! Classes usually began at 9:00 with breakfast at 7:30am. Nellie was going to class as Anthony had predicted but not at regular class times. Anthony and the others walked carefully down the corridor to classroom 1. The door was open and they peeked within. Nellie was already seated in one of the chairs. There was no one else in the room but Observer Dylan Pilkington (R3) who was seated quietly in a corner of the amphitheater type classroom.  

“That’s Turay’s seat,” Dylan Pilkington told them. Nellie had an opened book in hand again, as did Leila Pilkington, her quill again rapidly moving.  

Presently Nellie closed the book and set it on her desk. Looking down, Anthony could clearly read the title of the book: “Hogwarts, a History.”  

She looked attentively at the front, where Professor Iverson should have been. After a while, Nellie pulled out her wand and started waving it… Everyone looked at her wand attentively.  

“Definitely Turay’s wand!” concluded Leila Pilkington aloud and her quill wrote some more. That was another one of the Ravenclaw questions. What wand would Nellie hold? All wands were different. Nellie’s true identity could possibly be determined through the wand she carried…  

Nellie waved her wand several times, obviously practicing the wand motion. Finally she waved it and pointed it at the book. There was no sound even though Anthony knew the spell was taught with words spoken aloud. Another Ravenclaw question answered: what would Nellie say? Nothing! At least nothing they could hear… The cover of the book seemed to get rough; the lettering swirled into a white stripe.  

“She’s trying to turn the book into a badger,” announced Dylan Pilkington. “We did that last year before the Holidays…” he added informatively. The fur got thicker; stubby short legs formed, a stubby tail poked out, one part shrank forming a head and the perfectly formed badger proceeded to move across the table. “No one made it on the first try, though,” Dylan added in a thoughtful voice. Nellie flicked her wand at the badger; it turned back into a book. She reached out, grabbed the book and stuffed it into her bag. Then Nellie stood and walked towards the door. Anthony and Pilkington hastily backed away to let her pass unobstructed.  

Nellie walked down the corridor and headed towards the Great Hall. “Nine o’clock!” murmured Pilkington as they hastened to follow. “Lunchtime,” she added as they followed Nellie back into the Great Hall. Technically, it was lunchtime—rather students usually had lunch after two classes. But these classes were shorter and there was no way 9:00am could be considered lunchtime. Anthony and Pilkington moved quietly to the back of the hall being careful to not touch anything along the way. Nellie again sat at the Ravenclaw table and began to eat.  

Pilkington moved closer, no doubt to observe and record the food that would appear… As expected, a complete table setting with a filled plate of food appeared in front of Nellie. Steam rose from the plate and mug! A crusty chunk of bread rested on the plate; Anthony even could see the pat of butter melting on the bread… There was no scent, but that didn’t stop Anthony from imagining he
could smell the food. He remembered eating food like that once! Even though he wasn’t really hungry, just thinking about the food on her plate and watching her eat made his mouth water! That paltry dinner pasty in his pocket paled in comparison. Anthony sighed. They weren’t starving, but all of them had lost weight and not just from the exercise of climbing up and down stairs.

When Nellie finished, she pulled out another book and began to read. That’s what Anthony remembered most about Turey; she was always reading. It was a different book. Anthony recognized it: *Practical Defensive Magic and Its Use Against the Dark Arts*. Presently Nellie closed the book and stood. She again walked out of the great Hall. Pilkington closed her book too. Anthony waited a while before following.

“Down the other corridor” reported D’Airelle. “Got to be to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.”

Anthony nodded in agreement. He moved down the corridor stopping across from the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom door. He sat down and leaned his back up against the wall knowing it would be a while until Nellie finished “class.”

“She’s sitting in Turay’s seat taking notes,” reported Charlotte MacKenzie (G3) through the Extendable Ear… After a while she added, “She’s getting up; looks like she’s headed for the practice room… Yes, she’s gone into the practice room…” Later, she said: “Goldstein reports that she’s practicing but can’t tell which spell for sure. She’s not using the same motions each time…” That was Michael Goldstein. (R6) There was no set place for Defense practice so a classmate was unnecessary. Goldstein had high marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts wand work so the Ravenclaws placed him in the practice room on the off chance he would be able to recognize Nellie’s wand action and from that determine which spell was used. “She’s really good with *Protego* so nothing is hitting her…”

“That’s statistically impossible,” murmured Pilkington in Anthony’s ear while she wrote and Anthony had the feeling another important Ravenclaw question had just been answered but Pilkington wouldn’t explain further.

“She’s coming out!” whispered MacKenzie excitedly. Anthony and Pilkington quickly stood and flattened themselves against the far wall. It was break time during a regular Hogwarts school day. Where would Nellie go next?

Nellie swept out of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, back down the corridor, into the entry and down the stairs. Potions?

Definitely potions. Anthony and Pilkington watched her enter the potions classroom. They peeked inside but kept their distance. There were too many things in the potions room that could be touched and would possibly affect things.

“… She’s taking notes,” reported Kakkar. (R7) She taught the potions class. She also supervised potion production while the Slytherins were all sick. If Nellie mixed anything in the potions room, Kakkr would be sure to be able to identify it.

“Nettles… foxfur … stinkhorn … bat spleens… Looks like spider fangs, maybe wolf spider…” Kakkar said more to herself than any listener. Nellie was obviously mixing something. “… moth wings, possibly hawk, black beetles or puffer fish eyes … seven counter stirs… yellow vapors… Definitely a swelling solution!” Kakkar announced triumphantly. That would be a blow to Wycliff; she was probably hoping Nellie would mix some advanced potion not taught to 2nd years. Wycliff was still seeking some evidence that this was not all Turay’s doing…

It was lunchtime at H2; Anthony could feel his stomach rumble. But Nellie left the potions room and walked over to Professor Binns class, History of Magic. Anthony ate his second pasty while waiting for her to finish with Binn’s lecture, whatever it was. Ivy Malfoy was watching Nellie inside the class. She complained it was thoroughly boring! But then, Binns was always boring.

Charmes came next. “It’s party day!” wailed Observer Donald Erskine (S3) into the Extendable Ear. Anthony gulped and swallowed involuntarily remembering his own “party day” in Charms. That was the day the class had used charm spells to animate all the cooking equipment and make them prepare a meal. The brushes cleaned the vegetables, the knives cut the food, the teapot poured the water for the broth, the salt, pepper and spice containers coughed up the desired quantities like
mini volcanoes, and the spoons stirred the stew in a charmed self-heating pot. While that was cooking, other spoons stirred and shaped rolls and a mini oven did the baking. They’d even had the equipment fixing a mincemeat lattice tart for dessert. Getting the strips of dough to weave themselves into a lattice had been Anthony’s responsibility. It was a totally stupid Muggle activity—like they would ever need to bewitch spoons to stir, but the resulting food had been surprisingly good.

Then Nellie headed back towards the main entrance. As she walked a blue cloak materialized over her shoulders, a heavy scarf appeared around her neck and a thick cap covered her head. She was obviously going outside again.

Nellie stepped between the huge entry doors. Anthony and Pilkington put on their wraps and again mounted their brooms.

Nellie stepped briskly down the pathway, her footsteps again vanishing as she walked. Anthony and Pilkington flew overhead following. Potter joined them. “Spotted you from the tree,” he told them.

This time, Nellie headed towards the woods. Anthony, Potter and Pilkington pulled up their brooms and hovered in place at the edge. It was not safe to enter and follow.

“She’s got Pansy’s bucket,” reported Louisa Barrington (H3) from her nest in a tree through an extendable ear. “She’s holding it out like she’s feeding something… It’s the right height… The bucket’s swinging back and forth like something’s eating out of it… Got to be Pansy,” Barrington concluded aloud. “Or not. Looks pretty easy,” she added. “Pansy was never that easy to feed…”

Anthony mentally winced. Last year Hagrid had the 2nd year students caring for a Yale, a magical creature that looked like an antelope with the tusks of a boar and large horns that could swivel in any direction. That first night at Hogwarts, however, Ivy Malfoy had dumped the remains of her Bertie Botts Every Flavor Color Shake (red) in back of Hagrid’s hut. She was aiming for Fang’s food supply but the contents landed in the Yale’s feed instead. With Scorpius’ help, Ivy had hastily dried the grain and stirred it into the rest to conceal what she had done and the two snuck off. The “red” of the shake was “red” pepper.

Hagrid swore the Yale was a sweet as a newborn baby, but in reality, the Yale charged anything or anyone that moved. Hagrid’s creatures had a reputation of being less than friendly but Anthony had always wondered if the “peppered” grain had something to do with Pansy’s temper.

“She’s leaving,” announced Barrington abruptly.

The three, Anthony, Potter and Pilkington, flew back from the edge of the woods to give Nellie space and watched the path. Abruptly the sky turned dark! Not just dark, but pitch black!

“What?”

Blinded, Anthony instinctively clutched his broomstick tightly willing it “up” to keep from crashing or falling off.

“Lumos!” came Potter’s voice, apparently unfazed by the change in lighting. His wand instantly lit up enabling Anthony to see again.

“There she is!” exclaimed Pilkington. Anthony looked in the direction of Pilkington’s voice and saw her arm pointing to one side. He followed the direction of the arm and saw the light of a wand moving steadily towards the castle.

“Isn’t it only 3:00?” whispered Anthony in disbelief.

“Two thirty-five,” corrected Pilkington. “It didn’t take long to feed Pansy,” she added in explanation. “But the stars and the darkness suggest otherwise…”

“That way,” said Potter. He pointed to a soft blue glow that showed outside classroom 11 where Professor Firenze usually held his classes. The three flew to the light of Nellie’s wand hovering directly overhead when Nellie stopped.

Potter extinguished his light and swooped down for a closer look. Then he returned to Pilkington and Anthony. “Looks like the whole place is set up like a proper Astrology class,” Potter told them. That meant warm puffy pillows and fluffy blankets to snuggle under while watching the stars. Anthony thought Firenze was a joke but at the moment, he envied those blankets; it was really cold out.

“It’s a proper winter night sky, too,” added Pilkington.

Anthony looked up at the stars—they glittered and sparkled like diamonds. Then he pointed
his broom down and flew low towards the blue light of Nellie’s wand. He could see Nellie lying comfortably on her pillows wrapped in blankets oblivious of the cold. She had a small notebook open and her quill was plotting out the stars overhead…

Abruptly everything vanished. Anthony blinked in surprise at the sudden darkness. What had happened? He was certain they hadn’t touched anything.

“Lumos!” Anthony blinked at the light. Corner stood in the clearing where Nellie had been. In one hand he held the lit wand. In the other he held a small pink book that looked a lot like Pilkington’s. “We’re done now,” he announced looking up at Anthony. “Let everyone know,” he instructed.

“I don’t understand,” began Anthony in confusion. “I thought you had to let Nellie finish what she was doing.” Anthony drew out his whistle. He blew the agreed upon signal. There was no point in remaining now; Nellie was gone. A second whistle sounded from within the castle just in case not everyone inside had heard Anthony. They’d have a head count later to make sure…

“I did,” agreed Corner, “but it’s no longer necessary.”

“Why?!” questioned Anthony.

“It’s because she went to astronomy, isn’t it,” stated Potter flatly.

“Yes,” agreed Corner with obvious reluctance.

“So?”

“She made it nighttime,” stated Pilkington solemnly. “Nellie isn’t just going to school, she controls the school!”

“Huh?”

“She turned the place from day to night so she could attend astronomy,” reminded Corner. “What do you think is going to happen when she decides to go to sleep?”

“What? I don’t know,” answered Anthony in confusion. He’d never thought of such things. If Nellie went to sleep surely there’d still be stars outside, or would there?

“We don’t know either,” stated Corner. “And finding out is not a risk we’re willing to take. Besides, we’ve learned what we needed to know,” he added more cheerfully.

“Which is?”

“Nellie’s a student!”

“So?!” “Duuuh!”

“And where do the students go when the term ends?”

“Home?”

“Exactly!”

**********
Dear Grandmum,

School is almost out for the holidays. I can hardly wait!

**********

“Look!” whispered Holly Wycliff. “We’ve new snow!” She was seated outside the entrance of H2 bundled up against the cold. With her was Conner Fitzpatrick, Leila Pilkington, Anthony Richards, and Scorpius Malfoy. They were all waiting and watching… Sasha was curled up comfortably on Holly’s lap purring; Winky was curled up too, leaning happily against Holly’s side. Holly’s black and gold extendable bag rested on her other side. Conner, Leila, Richards and Malfoy also had bags with them—sturdy serviceable blue curtain bags, stuffed to capacity, double tied to make sure they did not open unexpectedly with straps already slung over their shoulders.

The group had been there since 5:45am. The snow had been brushed away making it safer for numerous students going in and out of H2. What remained had turned muddy and icy. Now the grounds looked pristine and white again. The kitchen had refreshed… Nellie should be walking into the Great Hall about now to read before beginning her meal… Not knowing when she’d have another chance to eat, Holly pulled out her pasty. It wasn’t really a pasty—fat for crust being hard to come by, but something Winky called a pierogi—a dumpling made of a combination of ground knotgrass, pumpkin and scurvy grass seeds filled with pumpkin, onion, turnips and ham. Leila, Conner, Malfoy, and Richards took out their pierogis as well.

Richards took a tiny nibble and then said, “Anyone bring some mustard?” Conner pulled out a small bottle and handed it to Richards. It was student-grown mustard from mustard seed found in the potions room. The seeds were ground and mixed with cider vinegar that was made from apples also grown by the students. The results were much spicier than the stuff Holly remembered eating when she was with her family. “Thanks,” said Richards who poured out some mustard on his pierogi and then handed the bottle to Malfoy. Malfoy put some mustard on this pierogi before handing it to Holly…

Then Malfoy pulled out his wand, pointed it at his pierogi. The tip of the wand lit up briefly. Small tendrils of steam rose up from his pierogi. Malfoy could say silent spells. Malfoy started to put his wand away when he hesitated. “Anyone else want theirs warmed?” he asked while looking about the group. All four of them held out their pierogies to be heated. Malfoy pointed his wand at each. The results warmed both Holly’s hands and her stomach.

Then Leila pulled out a long potions bottle. “Spiced cider,” she announced. “Anyone want some?” Everyone dug into their bags and fished out a mug (transfigured potions bottles) to be filled. Winky had her cooking class pressing the apples they grew to make the cider. The cloves that spiced it had been meticulously dug out of baked hams that came with refreshed kitchen food.

Holly would have never believed there would be a day when she sat alongside Richards and Malfoy to do anything. Malfoy practiced Occlumency now and was very good at it. Even with Sasha to confirm his identity, Holly found it unnerving to even be near him. And Richards, well, he was in the thick of things last year along with Malfoy. All the nasty, nasty things the two had done should have been totally unforgivable, and were—but, well, things change… They weren’t exactly friends, but neither were they combatants.

Forty-five minutes later the huge entrance doors swung open. Everyone watched. Was this the day?

Nellie walked past. She wore her wizard robes and was smartly dressed for the cold weather with boots, scarf, hat and gloves. Holly and Richards hastily stood grabbing their bags and brooms as they did. Richards soared into the air flying overhead yet keeping even with Nellie. With a bit of effort Holly managed to catch up; she hated broomstick flying.
Nellie confidently walked down the pathway making and erasing footsteps in the snow as she moved. Holly again wondered who she really was; she wasn’t Nadia; couldn’t be—Nadia would never have done any of this! Nellie crossed the driveway and continued walking. Richards pulled his broom up to a stop forcing Holly to do the same to avoid colliding into him.

“She’s headed towards the Greenhouses,” he announced with disappointment. He reached into his pocket, drew out his whistle and blew the prearranged signal letting everyone know. Then he urged his broom forward leaving Holly swiftly behind. Richards swooped down and through the receding image of Nellie causing it to vanish. Skillfully turning his broom as he flew, Richards returned to Holly. “Let’s get back to camp,” he told her. There’s still a lot of things to do…

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Most institutions of learning take some time off during the winter to enable their students to go home and share the holidays with their families. Such was the situation with the special school for princes and princesses.

One day the Princess found herself packing to go home for the holidays. She was both excited and apprehensive. What would it be like to return? Her mum was still dead and the Princess still loved and missed her very much. But the sting of her passing did not hurt as it had. The Princess had friends now and something to look forward to…

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“Look, there’s snow!” Holly Wycliff announced excitedly. The five, Holly, Leila, Conner, Richards, and Malfoy were again leaning up against the outside wall of H2 at 6:00 am. They had been camped out in front of H2 every morning for the last three days in the hopes that Nellie would reappear. Snow meant Nellie was sure to step outside. Would she again go to the Greenhouse or, elsewhere…?

The four again pulled out their pierogies to eat while waiting. Without asking, Malfoy pulled out his wand and warmed the pierogies. Leila got out her spiced cider to share and Malfoy warmed that as well. Conner passed around his mustard. They all began to eat.

The huge entry doors swung open.

“That’s too soon!” thought Holly suddenly. She’d barely started her pierogi.

“Six-fifteen,” murmured Leila confirming Holly’s guess.

Holly quickly gulped down her cider as Nellie stepped out. But was it Nellie? The girl Holly saw did not wear wizard robes but blue! A smart—“That’s a traveling suit!” Holly exclaimed excitedly. “Oh, my! It’s today! It’s today; it’s today!” Holly’s pierogi dropped to the ground forgotten.

“Can Winky Apparate?” asked Leila in a calm voice.

“What?” asked Holly in confusion. “Oh, yes! Winky! Winky?” Winky looked adoringly up at Holly with her big black eyes. “You know what to do?” Winky nodded. She stood, took a step away from the wall and held out her arms. Leila, Conner, and Malfoy took a hold of an arm. “You remember your orders?” questioned Holly. Winky nodded solemnly. Holly looked up! She could see a carriage roll up the driveway! Oh, my! It was today! It really was today! The Ravenclaws had assured Holly that Nellie would go home for the holidays like the other students but Holly never truly believed it would actually happen—until now. “Go!” Holly ordered and Winky vanished with a loud crack! But where she could go was anyone’s guess.

If possible, Winky would first go to Cousin Harry’s house and drop off Connor. Then she would go to Mr. Pilkington’s office in the Ministry to drop off Leila. Finally she would attempt to go to Malfoy’s home to drop him off. Failing that (Winky wasn’t sure she could enter Malfoy’s mansion,) Winky was to take Malfoy to Richards’ store on Diagon alley. Cousin Harry and Malfoy Senior were both Hogwarts governors; Leila’s dad would make sure the Ministry was alerted. Then Winky would return and start Apparating other students out of H2.
Unfortunately, the Ravenclaws didn’t think it would be possible for Winky to Apparate as far as London; Albus hadn’t seen thestrals at the station. That suggested their prison extended past the gates of H2. If Winky could not make it to Cousin Harry’s house, she was to go to the Hogsmeade Station, or whatever served as a station here. She would drop off her three passengers and then return to begin Apparating the other students to the station. Failing that, Winky was to take Conner, Leila and Malfoy to the gates of H2.

As soon as Winky vanished, Holly grabbed her broom, mounted it, hastily rose in the air and flew up over Nellie to Richards. Holly didn’t have to be with Richards now; any one of the Gryffindors would have happily stayed behind with Richards, but Holly didn’t want to leave Richard’s side at such an important time; he still had a promise to keep if things didn’t work out…

The first carriage rolled off without passengers, as did the second. Nellie hadn’t yet reached the curb. In theory those carriages were solid and could be ridden, they had been before, but no one wanted to take the risk.

Nellie got into the third carriage and it started moving slowly down the road. Holly wished she could see what was going on with the other students, but that was not her job. Taking time to “look” might needlessly jeopardize everything. Besides, she already knew what was going on; they had practiced numerous times while waiting for Nellie’s return.

Assuming Winky made it to the train station and there was a train waiting, Leila, Malfoy and Conner would check the train. It had to be solid! It had been during their arrival! If not, they were to remain until it became solid or Nellie’s arrival; there was no way to survive outside of H2 and always the risk of being trapped at the station with no way to return to H2.

Abruptly a loud “boom!” sounded! Holly looked up and saw a shower of sparks fill the sky. “Oh my!” she whispered excitedly. That was the signal that there was a train, a real train at the station! Conner, Leila and Malfoy would have also already checked it out and determined it was safe to board! Winky would then return to the student camp and Apparate prefects Owain Gruffudd, Taylor O’Daniels and Lynette Huckaby to the station. At the same time, Jeremy Corner would Apparate prefect Alessa Moore to the station. Winky would then return to the student camp and begin transporting first year students to the station. They were those least experienced with magic and most likely to slip up or get left behind…

After that it was a matter of waiting. At some point the gates would surely open to let out the carriages. When that happened, the rest of the students would leave. They had been camped out at the outer wall of the H2 boundaries on the inside of either side of the gate for nearly a week in anticipation of Nellie’s departure. The students were organized in groups of six and had been practicing a swift exit so many times they could do it in their sleep! Everyone was assigned to a group. The remaining prefects stood at the gates. They would call out “One!” the moment the gates opened. Six students, “Group One,” would come forward and mount their brooms. “Go!” the prefects would shout after insuring everyone was present and ready. The students would take off heading towards the station and the next group (2) would step forward…

Group 2 was made up of Albus Potter (G6), Martina Goyle (G6), Harriet Dempsey (H4), Bernard Bletchley (S6), Rose Weasley, (R6) and Daren Azi (R6), all experienced broom fliers. They would zip forward and fly escort on the either side of group 1 ready to catch falling/fallen students and help them along. When group 1 safely reached the station, Group 2 would fly back along the route, catch up with Group 3, pick up any stragglers and escort them the rest of the way to the station. That would continue until every student was safely at or on the way to the station. The next to last group would be the final four prefects. Head Boy Jeremy Corner and Head Girl Jennifer Woods would leave last after making sure no one had been left behind.

Once a student landed on the station he or she had to report to their prefect who checked off their name. Malfoy, Conner and Leila hustled the students on board the train. Everyone had to cram into the aisles as no one could actually sit down not knowing where Nellie would sit.

When the last four prefects arrived at the station, they would confer with the other prefects to confirm all students of their house had arrived. Then they would board the train as well. Jeremy and Jennifer would arrive last and would only board if all the other students were safely on board. Once
on the train another count would be conducted. Students were given numbers for efficient counting off to ensure everyone was present. Missing students were not an option.

All that had to be done before Nellie arrived in her carriage. It should be possible. The carriages moved at a slow, sedate pace, and there was even one behind Nellie’s that should add even more travel time; the students were flying much more quickly than the carriages and knew exactly what they were doing so there was no confusion, but would it be enough time?

Holly grabbed her broom and mounted. Sasha leaped lightly into the open blue bag slung onto Holly’s back. Sasha would ride in nothing covered. Holly rose into the air and quickly caught up with Richards. Nellie was just getting into a carriage. She set a small blue traveling bag down on the seat next to her. The carriage started off at a slow roll. The one behind Nellie paused momentarily and then began to roll forward as well. There were no other carriages behind it.

Using one hand to hang tightly onto her broom, Holly used her other hand to remove the straps of Sasha’s bag from her shoulders and hand the bag to Richards. He placed the strap over his shoulder. Sasha growled softly at the transfer but it had to be done. They’d practiced flying distances the whole week, but Holly still worried something might happen. If she slipped and fell, Holly could always Apparate the rest of the way, but not Sasha. Sasha had suffered too many injuries to ever risk Apparating and Holly would not leave Sasha behind.

Richards flew into position on the left side of Nellie. Holly took up her place on the right. Both flew overhead, a bit before, and on either side of Nellie. Nellie’s carriage slowly neared the gates to H2. Holly looked ahead and saw that the huge ornate gates were already open. She could just barely see the back of the first carriage pass between them. The next carriage made its way slowly towards them. To Holly’s intense relief, she saw no one on either side of the gates. More importantly, she sensed no one there. That was good. All the students had been camped out at the gate, awake and ready, when the five of them had left for the H2 entrance that morning. Holly was the triple check to insure no students were left behind. Nellie’s carriage passed through the gates. Holly ventured a look ahead and saw six brooms in flight. “The last six?” she hoped. Maybe this would work…

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Anthony Richards flew silently alongside Wycliff. The extra weight of her cat on his back forced him to fly more carefully. The cat had hissed and growled constantly when they first tried the transfer maneuver. Wycliff had loudly assured the cat that Anthony would never, ever transfigure her again and then glared at Anthony daring him to disagree…

Anthony had gulped guiltily. “Um, about that,” he said self-consciously, “I, ah, wasn’t really in my right mind at the time,” he told her. “You know that, don’t you?” Even now it was hard to apologize and actually mean it. Anthony knew better than to try.

“Yeah, bringing the Hand to school was pretty dumb,” said Wycliff. “And if anything happens to my cat, I’ll be reminding people of it.”

“You wouldn’t!” stated Anthony in disbelief. “You’ve no proof!”

“Just try me!” Wycliff warned. “Better yet, keep Sasha safe.”

“I will,” assured Anthony. And that he did mean to do his best for the cat, this time. The cat quit hissing after that and they were able to seriously practice transferring it back and forth.

“They’re the last,” Potter reported softly. He had swooped up silently from the other direction. “The rest are boarding,” he added informatively as he flew alongside the two. Anthony nodded. “Get back to the train,” he ordered. “Make sure everyone boards.” Potter nodded. He leaned forward and his broom raced ahead soon out-distancing the other flyers in front of them.

It was truly a crazy Ravenclaw plan, but the only one they had. Anthony couldn’t believe Corner was serious when he first suggested the students should “go home” with Nellie. She was an image, little more than a phantom, a holographic projection, as Fitzpatrick put it—not even there! When Nellie left, if she left, it would be riding on a train as solid as the bowl from which she ate at breakfast and vanished when she left.

But Corner argued Nellie was more than just an image. When Nellie arrived, so did the food,
and that was solid, as were the seeds in the Potions Room, Hagrid’s vegetables, and the weather. Corner suggested Nellie had created or been involved with the creation of all of H2. That meant she could create a solid train that they could use to leave.

“And if it’s a realistic image like her breakfast bowl?” questioned Anthony.

“Then we will only cancel her image,” stated Corner, “as has happened the other times when we’ve touched Nellie or her things. But if that train is solid, then we shall have to be on it, all of us, before Nellie boards and the train takes off. There will be no second chances!”

“Why not?” argued Anthony. “Nellie repeats her day over and over again here even though “touched.”

“Not quite,” corrected Corner. “Nellie is also following the calendar,” he informed Anthony. “We’ve been watching the dates. The rain started about the same time as it began to rain last year… And the switch to snow also coincided with the first snowfall of last year. There is only one date that students returned on the Express. If that date passes, Nellie may return to her home without us. Remember when the risk was too great to let Nellie finish a full day and sleep?”

Anthony nodded. He didn’t know so much about the risk but of their concern about that risk.

“Well, the risk that she may never return once she is “home” is just as great if not greater. With no Nellie to attend, there might be no H2 for us to live in!”

Nellie’s carriage plodded steadily forward. Suddenly Anthony heard a familiar chuffing sound! He looked up and saw the Hogwarts Express, complete with steam pouring out of all the right places! The prefects were boarding the Express. Corner and Woods landed on the platform; they dismounted their brooms, turned and looked at Anthony and Wycliff, waiting for their arrival.

“Go!” Anthony told Holly. She nodded and urged her broom forward. Wycliff landed just as Nellie’s carriage drew to a stop at the station. She (Wycliff) quickly dismounted dropping her broom in her haste and ran to a train door stopping just outside. Anthony landed on the platform. He felt a weight leave his back as Wycliff’s cat quickly left the pocket on his back and rejoined Wycliff. Anthony could see numerous faces plastered to the windows looking out; students were also packed at the stairs of each door, all watching anxiously. Where would Nellie go next?

Nellie leisurely picked up her bag and got out of the carriage. Anthony kept pace with her, but off to one side. Nellie walked towards the train. “Second car!” announced Wycliff loudly noting the direction. “Second or third!” Wycliff got on to supervise the evacuation of both cars. She didn’t have much to do; the Ravenclaws insisted everyone practice quick Express car evacuations—over and over again. It had been annoying but everyone, even the laziest, knew what to do. All the students in the second and third cars of the Express began to move. Students in the second car pushed their way to the first, students in the third car moved to the forth… Both cars emptied out ensuring no one would accidentally touch Nellie when she boarded or walked down the aisle no matter which way she turned. Hopefully, Nellie would sit in a berth of whichever car she entered.

Keeping abreast Nellie, Anthony moved over to the entrance between the first and second cars. He waited as the students moved out of the second car. When it was clear, Anthony took hold of the handle, lifted a foot to place on the first step and the door slid shut in front of him! “What?” Anthony stared blankly at the closed door. He reached out with his other hand and tried to open it. The door remained firmly shut. What should he do? What could he do? It should have taken Nellie longer than that to select a berth, enter and sit down. He should have had all that time to get on! The Ravenclaws had never practiced this scenario! There was the hand-hold he had already taken hold of. Perhaps he could hang onto that… The train blew a whistle and the wheels rumbled starting a slow move forward…

Anthony didn’t hear a “crack” but suddenly he felt a firm grasp on his extended arm and then he felt the most awful pulling, squeezing sensation as if he was being sucked into a narrow potions bottle… Abruptly the squeezing stopped.

“Don’t you dare puke,” warned the familiar voice of Corner in Anthony’s ear before Anthony could even open his eyes, “or everyone will know what happened!” Despite intense nausea and the urge to vomit, Anthony managed to keep his mouth closed and swallow down that which threatened to erupt. Fortunately, there wasn’t much in his stomach to keep down anyway. Anthony opened his
eyes. He was inside the train on the other side of the door; he could feel the rumble of the train as it picked up speed. Corner was next to him holding his arm tightly with one hand and his wand with the other. “I told you everyone gets out of this,” Corner continued while Anthony’s muddled mind tried to figure out what had just happened. “That includes you! No exceptions; no martyrs.” Corner let go of Anthony’s arm, waved his wand and vanished with a “crack!”

“I've been Apparated!” Anthony suddenly realized. He’d never Apparated before. It was ghastly! But at least he was now on the train with everyone else. Anthony climbed up the rest of the stairs and peered down the aisle. Holly’s green eyes and worried face looked back. She was seated on the floor at the other end of the car.

“She’s in there,” Holly reported softly while nodding her head to the nearest berth. Anthony nodded. That would have taken less time to do. That, and the students Anthony had waited for must have created a delay long enough for the door to slide closed in front of him, or not… No matter.

Anthony made his way to the berth next to Holly. He peeked through the window without touching the door. Nellie was seated comfortably with her traveling bag next to her and an opened book in hand. From his vantage point, Anthony could just make out the title.—The life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore by Rita Skeeter. “Where had Nellie found that book?” wondered Anthony absently. Albus Dumbledore was practically venerated at Hogwarts. That particular book would have never been on the shelves of Hogwarts…

Anthony returned to the other end of the car. He sat down positioning himself so he could see if Nellie left the car. If she did and headed his way, Anthony had to warn all the students in the first car to cram into the berths so Nellie could move down the aisles untouched and unobstructed. Wycliff would do the same if Nellie moved the other way. Nellie had never been seen entering a bathroom so hopefully Nellie would have no need to leave her berth.

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Chapter 24

A loud scream rent the air! Holly Wycliff started at the sound. What was it? She looked anxiously at Richards. He shook his head in confusion. The sound had come from her side not his. Holly cautiously stood and carefully moved into the third car. It was empty—just in case Nellie went that way. Holly moved into the forth car. The forth car was packed with students; the berths were filled to capacity and the aisles were standing room only. It was terribly uncomfortable, but some things were more important than comfort.

“What happened?” Holly asked Jennifer Woods who sat guarding the door of the forth car.

“The trolley cart lady,” answered Jennifer. “She just appeared! Everyone’s O.K., but she and her cart appeared in the middle of the aisle pushing aside the students already there. Corner cast a Petrificus Totalus spell on her so we could explain things without her doing something rash… We moved her and the cart into the last berth.”

“The elves!” stated Becky pushing her way through the students. “Remember the elves on the Express? If the trolley lady just appeared, what about them?”

Holly nodded. “Winky?” she stated aloud. Winky suddenly appeared. She had been there all along, next to Holly from the moment she got on the Express, but invisible. “Go to the elves on the Express. Explain to them what is happening and what they must do…” Winky nodded and vanished with a “crack,” this time actually leaving Holly’s side.

“I’m going back to my post,” Holly told Jennifer and returned to the edge of the second car.

“The trolley lady appeared,” she said to Richards. He nodded indicating he had understood. “The trolley lady appeared!” Holly thought with growing excitement. A real lady, not some realistic image! Where had she been all this time? How had she appeared now? Why? Was Nellie hungry and thinking of food? Holly peered into the berth where Nellie sat. Sure enough, Nellie was enjoying a pumpkin pasty. Holly saw a cauldron cake resting on the seat next to Nellie... Would the Trolley lady remain after Nellie finished her food? What did it mean if she did? What if she didn’t?

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 “…and now for the Letters…” Hogwarts Headmistress Minerva McGonagall said. She was in her office sipping tea while reading aloud to an empty portrait frame. She’d lost track of the number of days and hours she had read to it. Her voice had cracked ages ago and required a soothing potion to repair. The potion-laced herbal tea she now sipped protected her voice from going out again.

 “…the first one is addressed to Blaize Ashcroft,” continued Minerva. The “letters” were a new feature in the Daily Prophet. Parents of missing children could write them letters and Rita published them in the Prophet. It operated on the theory that, while the parents couldn’t find them, perhaps the children still had access to the news, wherever they were.

 “…How are you? We are all fine. We think of you every day and hope you are well…” That meant the Ashcrofts probably didn’t have a Healthstone for Blaize. Parents with Healthstones tended to omit the “hope you are well” part in their letters.

 “…little Lexi isn’t so little any more,” continued Minerva. “She’s walking now! That is when we can keep her on the ground. She can’t wait to see her big sister again and show her all the things she can do…” Minerva continued to read while trying to not think about what she was saying. The letters were a heartbreaking reminder of what everyone had lost. There was no charge for parents to send in a letter but Minerva was certain Rita sold even more papers by printing them. “…We love you so much, dear Blaize, please come home to us soon,” Minerva finished. She took another sip of tea and then turned her attention to the next letter. “It’s from the Reids,” she announced to the frame. “Dear Arthur,” Minerva began. “What are you doing today? We are all busy making preparations for the holidays. There are several packages already wrapped and under the tree. I won’t tell you how many are for you—I lost count. You don’t have to bring us anything but yourself—just being with us for the holidays is enough…”
“Instead of lounging about sipping tea and boring me with sappy letters of useless drivel you should be informing the Ministry to clear all the Muggles out of Kings Cross Station and open Platform 9 and ¾ and the service entrance immediately! I understand something called a “bomb threat” might prove a convincing motivation…”

The *Prophet* slipped from her fingers as Minerva stared in disbelief at the portrait frame. It wasn’t empty any more! Snape’s sallow face and piercing black eyes looked back at her expectantly. “Well?” he demanded. “Close your mouth and get to work! This is no time to take a break!”

Minerva managed to close her mouth. “Uh, right. Everard! Go find Thomas and pass the word! Tell Kingsley, too,” she added, but she spoke to an empty frame.

“Now, suppose you tell me what this is all about,” Minerva said turning back to Snape’s portrait. But Snape wasn’t there! Had it all been a dream? No, it couldn’t be! Everard would not have left his frame on a whim. What else should she do? “Dilys,” she commanded. “Alert St. Mungo’s.” If something was happening, the healers would want to know and might be needed. The gold ringleted witch stood and left her frame. “And Phineas, perhaps you could notify P—” But Phineas was no longer in his frame, nor was Albus in his...

All that was left was to notify the professors. Minerva drew out her wand. She sent a *patronus* to the professors on campus. Then she put on her traveling cloak. It was cold out and she needed to take a trip to London, specifically, Kings Cross station…

**********

Harry Potter arrived just outside the Kings Cross Station heedless of any Muggles nearby. Ginny was with him. Harry had no idea why he was there, just that Phineas had told him to get to the Station immediately! There was only one reason why anyone would go to the station so Harry paused only to send swift owl to the Burrow and then he and Ginny had left.

There was no need to worry about Muggle witnesses; the outside of Kings Cross Station looked totally chaotic! Whistles blaring, sirens blasting, smoke streaming out of the doors, people running everywhere!

Harry and Ginny swiftly pocketed their wands. Then Harry grabbed the arm of the nearest Muggle running past. “What’s going on?” he questioned pulling the man to a stop.

“There’s a BOMB!” he shouted. “Get out of here!” The man broke free of Harry’s arm and ran off. Harry redrew his wand and headed towards the smoking entrance. Ginny followed. Covering his mouth and nose with his arm Harry plunged into the smoke. A loud explosion sounded; the whole building rattled. Bits of ceiling fell to the ground. Harry could just make out a familiar looking figure with a bubble round head standing in the midst of the smoke. Dean?

Taking Ginny’s hand Harry headed towards Dean. *Boom!* Another explosion sounded. The building shuttered; more smoke billowed forth!

“Is that everyone?” Dean shouted to someone across the station. “Make one more sweep to be sure and then set up the anti-Muggle wards. Oh, hello, Harry,” greeted Dean noting Harry’s presence. “Come to help out?”

“Yes, of course,” answered Harry promptly between coughs. “What do you need?”

“Move the smoke to the entrances and keep it coming. We want the Muggles to think it’s not safe in here and keep away. Harry and Ginny immediately used their wands to push the smoke outside. While they worked, they saw aurors set up wards and other aurors create what looked to be huge bubble charms filled with clean air around the platforms. Some aurors wearing official looking Muggle uniforms stepped outside. *Boom!* Another explosion rattled the building. But this time Harry saw the auror setting off the explosion and helped her create billowing smoke to send out the nearest door.

The interior of the station cleared of smoke. Smoke continued to billow out each door and sirens blared loudly outside. Someone shouted, “*Muffliato!*” And the inside of the building suddenly went quiet.

When Harry looked around, he saw only witches and wizards within. Ron and Hermione
were there as were the rest of the Weasleys, the Richards, the Malfoys, Headmistress McGonagall, Luna, Neville, Professor Slughorn, Hagrid, Wizard Pilkington, Healer Winonan…”

“What’s going on?” questioned Harry when he neared Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic.

“Don’t know for sure,” answered Kingsley. “Just that we need to clear the Muggle side and make sure the platforms are open…”

“What do we do now?” asked Harry almost fearfully, afraid to accept the hope that surged within.

“We wait,” answered Dean coming to stand next to him, “and trust it’s not an empty tip.”

“Stephen,” whispered Holly stating the obvious. She stood at the end of the second car watching for Nellie. Richards was at the other side doing the same. The aisles of the other cars were crowded with standing students, waiting expectantly. They had started filling the aisles when the scenery outside changed from pastures to buildings. They would have to move quickly once the train pulled into the station. The owls had messages tied to their legs, ready to take flight once their cage doors opened. Only one bag per student; excess luggage went into an extendable bag carried by their prefect. It would be sorted and distributed later if this worked.

Holly felt a tug on her shirt. She looked down. Winky, visible, looked back at Holly and nodded her head slowly. “Now?” asked Holly with rising excitement. “You sure?” Winky nodded again. “Well, go!” Holly ordered. “Go! Go! Go!” Winky vanished. Holly drew out a whistle Conner had whittled for her; she would need it soon; she couldn’t whistle at all otherwise…

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The “crack” echoed loudly within the emptied station. A single house elf appeared momentarily and then vanished with another “crack!”

Had he really seen right? Was that a tomato red, tomato shaped nose? “I think that was Winky!” breathed Harry Potter in disbelief and growing excitement.

“How?” questioned Ginny. She’d never seen the Wycliff house elf.

“Winky,” repeated Harry, hoping his eyes hadn’t played tricks on him. “Holly’s elf!”

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Winky reappeared by Holly’s side. Holly looked down anxiously at her. Winky was smiling and nodded her head. “Oh, my!” thought Holly as she blew the prearranged signal on her whistle. “It’s working, it’s really working!”

More whistles sounded throughout the Express, just in case they hadn’t heard Holly’s. Holly couldn’t see what happened next, of course, but they had practiced for this. Evacuation off the train before Nellie was paramount. Everyone who could Apparate (7th years) would do so as soon as they heard the signal. They would Apparate off the Express and onto the station (Wizard side.) Winky and the Express house elves would take students to the station as well, returning for more, always selecting the ones at the end of the lines to shorten the lines until the cars were empty of students. Once things were explained, the Trolley lady had agreed to take some with her, too. Jeremy was adamant that no student attempt to do side-by-side Apparating; they were too inexperienced and the risk of splinching was too great.

Once on the station Jennifer Woods and Jeremy Corner would take up positions next to the exits. They would poke their heads through the exits to make sure they worked. Nikita Kakkar (R7) and Marella Avery (S7) would go through first and get ready for the others.

The train slowed to a stop. Holly could see other students already at the station! The car doors opened and the remaining students spilled out. “This way! This way!” Holly heard Jennifer and Jeremy shouting, urging students to the exits. “Don’t stop!” they encouraged. Students were
supposed to literally run from the station to an exit and jump through without stopping.

“Five!” shouted a loud voice. That meant the fifth Hogwarts Express car was empty! The last person leaving, a prefect, made the announcement.

“Three!” shouted another prefect.

“Six!” shouted another prefect.

Nellie opened her berth door. She stepped towards Holly.

“One!”

“Go!” shouted Richards. Holly hastily scrambled off the train before Nellie could reach the door of the car.

“Four!” There were six cars, the engine and caboose. That meant everyone was off—except Richards. Holly raced to Anthony’s side of the car determined he not get stuck again. She saw Anthony coming down the stairs reached up, grabbed a hand and pulled him off.

Without looking back, the two ran to the nearest exit. “I see her! Hurry!” shouted Woods meaning Nellie was stepping off the train.

“Anyone else here?” questioned Jeremy in Holly’s ear. He had left the Service Exit and had Apparated next to her while keeping pace with their running.

Holly reached out with her mind. Sasha was again on her shoulder, her claws digging into Holly’s padded clothing. Richards was besides her, running. An invisible Winky ran right behind Holly. Ahead was Jennifer. Holly could sense no other emotions. “Just us,” Holly told Jeremy. Holly couldn’t sense Jeremy, but Sasha would tell her if anything was wrong with the person next to her.

“Then let’s go!” Jeremy moved ahead. He grabbed Woods’ hand and pulled her through the Platform 9 and ¾ exit. Without stopping, Holly, Richards and Winky ran through.

No one saw Nellie walk away from the Hogwarts Express. The Express behind her shimmered and faded completely. Nellie walked into the Platform 9 and ¾ pillar and vanished. The Express reappeared as if it had never left.

**********

“Look!” whispered Ginny excitedly.

“What?” asked Harry looking in the direction Ginny had indicated—the pillar representing Platform 9 and ¾.

“A head!” she answered, “I’m sure I saw a head!”

Harry saw nothing unusual but kept looking and suddenly a person came through the pillar! Not just any person, a student! He had to be! She was young enough to be a student and dressed in Ravenclaw blue. The student came to a stop, wheeled around and pulled something blue from her bag, two somethings, actually. They looked like thick blue squares of fabric. She tucked one piece under her arm and shook the second one out. It grew and grew until it became a huge carpet with a yellow “S” stitched onto it that floated gently to the ground a few meters from the entrance. She shook out her other square of fabric until it became a huge blue carpet with a yellow “R” stitched on it that landed gently next to the first carpet.

“Look!” whispered Ginny directing Harry’s attention to the Service Entrance. Another student was there! It looked like she was doing the same thing…

A sudden motion caught Harry’s attention. He turned his eyes back to the pillar in time to see two students running out! Definitely students! Young, maybe first or second year! Harry reached out and gripped Ginny’s hand tightly. She squeezed his in return.

The first student took hold of the other students who had just come through and pulled them to the side of the pillar. The first student let go of those students and turned in time to catch three more
students running through and pulled them to the side. The first two students helped catch the next
group that came through. More and more students came through—in groups of three, four and five!
Too many to count! Each student was caught and pulled aside by those already outside!

Suddenly, it was over! The flood of students had ended. Harry blinked in surprise when he
saw the crowd of students standing between the platform 9 and ¾ pillar and the Service Exit on the
carpets. More than fifty, more than one hundred, perhaps even two hundred or more! They stood so
closely together their numbers were impossible to count! An elderly witch stood to one side
straightening her clothes. Besides her stood four soot covered house elves.

“It’s everyone!” whispered Ginny excitedly. “It has to be!”

Harry nodded his head wordlessly and clutched Ginny hand even tighter. She had to be right!
But was she? Dare they hope?

**********

Anthony Richards, still breathless from his run through the exit, quickly straightened his purple
robes and stepped forward.

“Report!” he shouted loudly, as they had practiced.

“Gryffindors present!” answered prefect O’Daniels. The students had practiced lining up in
a specific order on the Gryffindor carpet enabling O’Daniels to tell at a glance if anyone was
missing.

“Hufflepuffs present!” answered prefect Huckaby.

“Ravenclaws present!” answered prefect Moore.

“Slytherins present!” answered prefect Gruffudd.

That was it. They were all there! They’d done it! Or had they? Absolute silence fell over the
station.

Anthony turned slowly and surveyed the people in the station. The witches and wizards
surrounding them were so still and quiet. There were faces within the crowd he recognized, some
who meant much to him, but were they real? Corner had hinted that there might be a way to alert the
wizard community of their arrival, but hadn’t explained how. Had it indeed happened? Or was this
all another cruel trick? Would they all ignore him and then vanish as they had at Hogwarts?

Within the group Anthony spotted Headmistress McGonagall. What was she doing here? No
matter. That was the person he needed to approach. He walked forward to face her. Each step he
took seemed to echo loudly inside the otherwise silent building.

**********

Minerva McGonagall stared in disbelief at the person walking towards her. Anthony Richard!
It had to be him in that royal purple robe with the “Assistant” badge attached. But he was ever so
much thinner than she remembered. All the students were. What had happened? Where had they
been?

“Ma’am,” he began loudly. “I am pleased to report that the students bunking school have been
located…”

“What? Was this a mere matter of bunking school?”

Then, “Seriously?” shouted a voice from among the students; Minerva recognized it as Conner
Fitzpatrick. “I’m not serving detention after the holidays!”

Everyone laughed. That anyone could worry about a detention at a time like this!

“Thank you, Mr. Richards,” said Minerva managing to keep a straight face. “Your report is
duly noted. Uh, did you find all the students bunking?” she questioned cautiously using Richard’s
choice of metaphors as a reference.

Richards straightened. He glanced back at the students standing at attention behind him and
turned again towards Minerva. “Yes, ma’am!” he told her proudly.

Minerva felt her whole body sag with relief. Was it possible their nightmare was over? “Good
job,” she told Richards. “Uh, perhaps we should forgo the usual consequences for, ah, bunking, this time. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, ma’am,” answered Richards in a grave voice and a twinkle in his eyes. Then he added, “Do you think school could be dismissed for the Holidays so we could spend time with our families?”

“Yes, of course,” agreed Minerva quickly.

Richards turned to the students, “You heard her!” he shouted. “School’s out!” Abruptly the students in those tight formal rows gave a loud cheer, broke ranks and ran towards the wizard adults, to the parents that filled the building…

**********

Vernon Wycliff sat in his room playing a computer game. His friend Kenny sat next to him reading a book. His parents were in the living room with the tube on. It was blaring loudly reciting the latest news: a terrorist attack on Kings Cross Station! The reports had been going on all day; Vernon had watched when the news first broke, but there had been no new developments in a while. He could still see in his mind’s eye images of the black smoke that billowed out of the station doors. One could only guess what the insides looked like. No word yet on the number of deaths and injuries or who had set off the numerous bombs that still shook the whole area!

The doorbell rang. Then Vernon heard the sound of the door opening. That was weird. There hadn’t been enough time for mum or dad to get up and answer it.

“Hi everyone!” Holly’s familiar voice sang out. “I’m back! Did you miss me?”

Holly! Vernon shot off his bed, game forgotten. He rushed into the entry! Mum and dad were already there wrapping Holly within their arms. Behind her stood the tall figure of Cousin Harry! There was a broad smile on his face. Vernon had never seen him smile like that.

“Yes, mum, I’m fine!” Holly assured their parents. “We all are!”

“All?” echoed Vernon in disbelief.

“Everyone!” assured Holly. She released mum and dad and turned to Vernon. “I’ve missed you, too,” she told him while giving him a tight hug. Holly looked and felt thinner than he remembered, but otherwise seemed fine. “Hi, Kenny,” Holly greeted looking over Vernon’s shoulder. “What are you doing here?”


“I’ll explain later,” she told Kenny.

“Holly?” said Cousin Harry. “We’d better go…”

Holly let go of Vernon and backed away from her family. “I can’t stay,” Holly informed them. “Not even supposed to be here now!” she added confidentially. “We were supposed to go directly from the station to the hospital but I insisted we stop here along the way. I wanted to let you know I was fine and that I’d be home for the holidays, just like usual! Well, gotta go!” Holly added cheerfully. “Bye!”

“Good day,” said Mr. Potter tipping the brim of an imaginary hat. “I’ll bring her back soon,” he promised. “Merry Christmas,” he added as the two backed out of the house closing the door behind them.

Dad moved to the closet in the entryway. He pulled out his coat and scarf.

“What are you doing?” asked mum.

“I’m going out!” dad announced. “I’ve some shopping to do. Want to come?”

“Uh, yes,” said mum. “Definitely. Just let me get my purse.”

Dad nodded. He put on his coat. “Vernon?” dad asked as he wrapped the scarf around his neck.

“Uh, no,” Vernon answered. “No thanks. I’ve some things to do here…”

Dad nodded. Soon he and mum were out of the house, in his car and driving off. Vernon could guess why. Neither had made any holiday preparations; there had been no point, until now. Vernon went back into his room and got out his computer. He punched in a certain address, an
internet support group, one accessible by invitation only... “They’re back!” he wrote. “All of them! They’re fine and will be home soon!”

***********
Once upon a time there was this beautiful princess with smooth olive skin, silky long wavy black hair, and big beautiful brown eyes... No it was a sorceress, a very beautiful Sorceress with raven black hair, fair skin and ruby lips. She was a clever Sorceress who wanted to live forever so she used her incredible intelligence to find a way to accomplish that goal. Was she evil? That is for you to decide. The Sorceress did not think of herself in that way, but she was very determined.

The Sorceress considered using horicruxes. Unfortunately, while they could extend life indefinitely, they could not stop the aging process. The Sorceress was very beautiful and did not want to get “old.” It was not that she minded aging so much, older women got much more respect, but she didn’t want to stay that way. The thought of spending the rest of her years with creaking bones, failing muscles and dimming eyesight was distinctly undesirable. The Elixir of Life was also a possibility, but while use of it did prolong life, it, also, could not stop the aging process. So, the Sorceress determined to find a new way to achieve her goals.

After years of research and experimentation, the Sorceress finally discovered a way she could place her consciousness into another, younger body, discarding the useless withered husk of her previous body once the process was complete. Her powerful will and intellect could overcome the lesser mind in the new body making the new body fully hers absorbing all previous memories as her own.

The Sorceress also decided that the best body to take over was one of her own blood. She had easy access to family, less questions were asked and, of course, it insured retention of her land and property through inheritance. Yes, legally binding wills could be written giving the property to an outsider, but wills had to be done before the transfer was made and involved nosy solicitors, not to mention the hassle of selecting a suitable replacement.

Accordingly, the Sorceress selected a suitable wizard to father her child. It was easy enough to woo the man; men were imbeciles anyway. The man proposed and marriage happened soon after. A child was conceived, and a healthy baby girl was born. A year later a terrible “accident” happened and the man died leaving behind a “grieving” widow and a baby daughter. The Sorceress raised her daughter carefully.

When the Sorceress decided the time was right, she placed her consciousness into her daughter. The daughter’s personality was easily suppressed. The Sorceress used the daughter’s memories to fool anyone who knew the daughter and stepped into the daughter’s life as if it were her own…

When it became necessary, a new husband was selected and a new daughter was conceived…

In this way the Sorceress enjoyed many, many years of youth.

**********

One day, things went terribly wrong. The Sorceress’ daughter met a young man while at school and the two eloped. The Sorceress was not pleased with this turn of events. But she smiled graciously and welcomed her daughter and new son-in-law. The happy couple went to live in in a small cottage on a hill. Soon, they were celebrating the birth of their own daughter.

It took careful planning but the Sorceress eventually arranged an “accident” making her daughter a widow. She then invited her daughter and granddaughter to live with her. The
daughter refused the suggestion until unexpected financial difficulties forced her to take advantage of Sorceress’ generous offer…

A few years later, the Sorceress decided it was time to place her consciousness in her daughter’s body. But that went wrong too! The daughter resisted! That was to be expected, but the daughter’s resistance was much stronger than the Sorceress had ever before experienced. When the battle ended, the daughter lay dead and the Sorceress was aged, withered and weak from the effort. A minor setback; the granddaughter remained…

**********

Hogwarts Hero!

When he realized there were no professors, newly appointed Headmistress’ Assistant Anthony Richards masterfully took charge. With persistence and ingenuity, he kept the students working together until they could find a way home…

Daily Prophet

The return was everything he could hope for: the accolades, the cheers, the interviews, everything until Old Lady Thackeray barged in. Anthony Richards was in the middle of posing for photos and completing an interview with Rita Skeeter when Thackeray hobbled in with that old black knobbly staff of hers.

“Where’s my baby?” she demanded while banging her staff loudly on the floor. “You said you brought them all home,” she accused Anthony, “so where is she?”

“Where is who?” questioned Anthony in confusion. He had gotten them all home. What was she talking about?

“Nadia!” the lady exclaimed. “Where’s Nadia?”


“Yes, of course I do!” snapped the lady. “Where is she? Where is my baby!”

“Turay was not at Hogwarts!” Anthony told her.

“Of course she was!” insisted Thackeray. “I took her to the Express myself! I saw her board! I waved good-bye!”

“She was never on the train.” Anthony said positively.

That’s when the wizarding community learned there was one student still missing… Anthony’s photo and headline had to be shared with Thackeray’s tearful photo and plea seeking Turay’s whereabouts. “I thought she was with the rest of the students!” Thackeray told the Prophet. “She was upset about that nastiness last year; I assured her things would be O.K. this year, but I know she was worried. I swear I saw my dear Nadia board the train! If you say she never rode the train then she must have boarded through one door and left through another when I wasn’t looking!”

“That’s where I saw her!” exclaimed Anthony as he studied the photo in the Prophet. He’d been too busy being annoyed at her interruption and then surprised at her accusation to really look at Thackeray before.

“Who?” asked Paige. They were at Anthony’s home sharing breakfast while Anthony was reading the Prophet. Paige and Tom were there to celebrate Anthony’s return…

“Nellie!”

“Who?”

“Nellie!” Anthony explained that “Nellie” was the student name for the unknown person at H2. While the Ministry had quickly circulated Nellie’s picture as a person of interest, it had not included the student name for her nor had anyone stepped forward to identify her.

“Who is she?” questioned Paige curiously.
“Old Lady Thackeray!” answered Anthony.
“That can’t be!” scoffed Tom. “She’s an old bag! She looks nothing like the sketch!”
“Not now,” agreed Anthony. “But remember, at your reception? She was there showing off her photo album! She pinned me for a good half hour making me look at her family photos—parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and lots of herself when she was younger... Horribly boring they were, too. It was your reception so I couldn’t make a scene but I was really glad when she ran out of photos and I finally escaped from her clutches.”

“Are you saying that you saw Nellie in her photo album?”
“I’m certain of it.”
“Perhaps we should pay Mrs. Thackeray a visit to take a look at that photo…”

**********

“And without further ado, I give you Anthony Richards!” Everyone clapped enthusiastically. Anthony stood proudly. Mrs. Paige Brenna Crowley and Anthony’s family sat next to him and clapped as well. The merchants of Diagon Alley had put together the celebration to honor all the students of Hogwarts and their families. It had been Tom’s idea, but one rapidly embraced by the rest of the Diagon Alley community. The celebration wasn’t as spontaneous as the one given Wycliff, but it was still grand. The wizard families and their children were all there. Kingsley, the Minister of Magic was there, Thomas, Head of Magical Law Enforcement and several other Ministry Officials had also come to share in the festivities. Also in attendance were McGonagall, the Hogwarts Governors and professors. Who better to speak on behalf of the students but Anthony Richards? Everyone knew that without Anthony to keep things together, things would have turned out considerably different. Perhaps one of the Gryffindors or Ravenclaws could have done as well, but that was all speculation. It was Anthony who had stepped forward first, kept his position and led everyone safely back home!

Anthony’s success at H2 had exceeded far beyond Paige’s wildest dreams. His popularity created a clear path into the Ministry. The Richards were poised to be the leaders of the next generation!

Anthony slid off his robe and put it over the back of his chair. Paige nodded approvingly. Everyone else up there wore wizard robes. Anthony would stand out by being the only one without a robe! The purple robe slid off the chair back and onto the floor. Paige reached down and picked it up. She shook the dirt from the robe and gave it a brush before returning it to the chair. That’s when she felt an unfamiliar lump. She knew Anthony had a pocket sewn into his robe to hold the Hogwarts rules—but this lump was not a book. She reached in and withdrew the item in the pocket—a small potions bottle tightly corked…

**********

Anthony Richards opened the door to his bedroom. It had been a long day. Smiling constantly, repeating “thank you,” modestly time and time again, posing for photos and shaking hands did get tiring after a while and he was exhausted. He pulled his wand out, set it besides the bed and began to unbutton his shirt. It would be nice to get into something more comfortable too…

“Stupify!”
“What?” Anthony felt himself blasted across the room! He hit the wall hard, slid to the floor landing in a heap! Before he could recover thick black bands suddenly wrapped around his arms, body and legs so tightly he couldn’t move!

“I told you what would happen if I ever caught you with something even remotely dark!” came a familiar voice as his body lifted, turned in the air and his back slammed against the wall! “Did you think I was kidding?”

“Paige? What? No!” Anthony managed to stammer aloud. He remained upright against the wall only because the bands around him kept his knees from bending.

“Did you think your recent popularity would protect you from me so you’d be free to do as
you pleased?” Paige demanded angrily! Her eyes flashed fire; Anthony was certain he was seconds away from being blasted into oblivion!

“No! Of course not!” Anthony denied quickly. He hadn’t thought about it at all! Hadn’t had reason to! “Why?” he demanded. “What’d I do?”

“Then explain this!” With her free hand Paige brought up a tiny potions bottle and held it up to his face!

“Oh.” “What’s that?” he asked stalling for time. This was not good.

“Death Cap! Hemlock! Baneberry! Belladonna! Bloodroot!” she said in a rage. “It doesn’t get more toxic or darker than that! I found it in your robes!” she told him. “Where’d you get it?”

Anthony didn’t speak. The truth to that wouldn’t make him look better and he was so rattled he knew he couldn’t make up a convincing lie let alone deliver it…

“Must I use Veritaserum on you?” she demanded.

“I didn’t get it!” Anthony blurted. He didn’t want Veritaserum; he’d heard stories about it. It not only forced the user to speak the truth, but loosened one’s self control so he’d speak about everything and anything—things Anthony definitely did not want to say!

“What? It just magically appeared in a pocket only you and I knew about?” stated Paige derisively. “You weren’t surprised when I showed it to you,” she continued relentlessly. “You didn’t question the contents! You knew about it! Who gave it to you?”

“Nobody!” denied Anthony. “I made it myself!” Oops!

Paige moved in closer. They were eye-to-eye, nose-to-nose, literally! “Why?” Anthony gulped. “I, ah I can’t tell you,” he answered. “I … promised…”

“Promised?” questioned Paige softly. “You colluded? With whom?” Anthony could feel her icy breath on his cheek chilling him to the very bone.

“No one!” he reiterated. “Not like that!”

“And how was it?” questioned Paige. “A whim? A dare or bet? Something to do in times of boredom?” Her black eyes seemed to bore directly into Anthony.

“No, nothing like that,” admitted Anthony unable to look away from Paige’s eyes.


“Yes!” said Anthony with relief; that was a story she could buy… “No!” he corrected suddenly realizing that Paige didn’t need Veritaserum to know when he was lying and she would know a lie like that… “But it wasn’t what you think, I swear! And please, don’t make me take Veritaserum,” he begged. “Don’t make me break my word…” Wycliff had said Slytherins kept their word. That hadn’t meant much at the time, but suddenly now it did; suddenly keeping his word was all that he had left…

“You are this close to dying here and now!” whispered Paige. “Give me a reason not to!” Anthony thought frantically. What could he say and not break his word? “Dumbledore!” he blurted.

“Huh?”

“Dumbledore and Snape!” Wycliff had used those names, well, not the Snape name, but Anthony had looked it up, and only the Dumbledore’s death by Headmaster Snape, came close to what Wycliff had asked of him…

“What?”

“Snape killed Dumbledore,” said Anthony speaking quickly repeating what little he knew about Snape, “and no one calls him dark!” That was because Potter wouldn’t let them. But no one knew why… except maybe Wycliff…

Paige straightened. She reached out and grabbed Anthony tightly by the upper arm. Suddenly he felt himself being squeezed and pressed into that tiny potions bottle again… He was Apparating!

**********

When Anthony Richards regained his senses, he was again leaning up against a wall. Paige
was talking to someone. "Poison!" she exclaimed. "Very lethal and very fast! And he made it with intent to use! Could anything be more dark than that? Except, he denies a dark intent but won’t tell me why! Claims to be keeping a promise! And he uses your name, yours and Dumbledore’s as justification!"

Anthony opened his eyes. Paige was talking to the still in her potions room! He knew it was of the very unpopular, but Slytherin, Hogwarts Headmaster Severus Snape. He knew Wycliff had given it to Paige as a wedding gift. Tom had suggested getting rid of the portrait as it was only a still; Paige had murmured the “intent” was good and she had nothing more “suitable” to place on the wall…

“I swore to end Anthony’s life if he ever did anything again even remotely dark,” Paige told the portrait. “And I will do so without hesitation,” she assured him. “But,” Paige stopped and looked from the portrait to Anthony and back to the portrait, “I am loath to take his life without good cause… if there is one…”

The figure in the frame stirred. He moved his head and fixed his black eyes on Anthony. “It moves!” thought Anthony with shock. “It’s not a still!”

The head turned its direction back to Paige. “Leave us,” he commanded. Paige nodded. She placed the potion bottle on the table between the portrait and Anthony and stepped out of the room.

**********

Anthony stared at the portrait without speaking. The figure in the portrait stared back not bothering to move the stringy black hair that fell over his face.

Finally, the portrait spoke. “You make it at H2?” he asked while directing his eyes at the small potions bottle on the table. His lips curled up into a sneer as he spoke.

“Yeah,” Anthony admitted. There was no point in denying it.

“How?”

“How?” questioned Anthony in surprise.

“Yes, how? She’s rather impressed with its construction.”

“She was?” thought Anthony. “How can you tell?”

“She said, “Lethal and fast!” replied the portrait. “That’s a potion well made. I trust speaking of its construction does not breach any promises made?” added the portrait.

“Oh, no,” answered Anthony thoughtfully. “I don’t think so…”

“How did you make it?” repeated the portrait.

And Anthony found himself describing the potions book Basu had lent him to read, the trip to the potions room to get the supplies, his surprise upon finding them untouched in his robes after he had recovered from food poisoning and the hours he had spent using borrowed equipment to crush and mix ingredients in secret. He finished by describing how he had placed a bottle of resulting liquid in the pocket in his robes where he could get to it easily if necessary…

“I see,” said the portrait thoughtfully. “Is there any more?” he questioned.

“Of that?” asked Anthony looking at the potion bottle. “No!” he assured the portrait. “I dumped the leftovers out as soon as I filled the bottle. Too dangerous! W-ah someone could have found and “accidentally” drunk it! Forgot about the actual bottle though…” he added regretfully.

“Not that it was in any danger of being accidentally drunk while in my cloak…”

“Hmm.” The figure in the portrait stirred and straightened in his chair. “I take it that Wycliff was doing more than hanging knotted ropes in the rafters, then,” he asked in a dry voice.

Anthony stared. How could he have known!

“Talking to me is not the same as “telling” someone,” the portrait reminded. “As I am not alive to tell… And you have told me nothing I do not obviously already know… So,” he added, “did Wycliff put you up to this?”

“Yes, sir,” admitted Anthony. It was so good to be able to talk about it! “I had to!” he added defensively, “or Wycliff wouldn’t get up off the floor! They had her on a suicide watch!” he exclaimed righteously, “and I realized I had better do something definite so she’d know I could keep
my word should something actually happen or she’d try something else… But I guess she did anyway—try something else…” He hadn’t known about the knotted ropes; how had the Headmaster?

“Back up upon back up,” said the Headmaster dryly. “Redundancy to guarantee eventual success. That is the Hufflepuff way. Wycliff is a Hufflepuff even when she doesn’t wish to be. Does that promise extend past your time at H2?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so,” answered Anthony thoughtfully. “Not now that we’re free of there…”

“Then it would be safe to say you have no more need of the potion…”

“Definitely not!” agreed Anthony.

“Would you be able to reach that bottle on the table?”

“Uh, maybe?” answered Anthony hesitantly. He was tied rather tightly…

“Then do so.”

Anthony obligingly straightened off the wall and kind of hopped to the table. The fingers of one of his hands could just reach the bottle.

“Uncork it,” ordered the Headmaster.

That was harder to accomplish but eventually Anthony managed to get the cork out of the bottle.

“Pour the potion on your straps,” instructed the Headmaster.

That should have been hard to do, tied up as he was, but there were so many straps binding Anthony that he managed to position the bottle over a strap and dribble some of the potion on it. He wondered why he was doing it though; it was a potion, not an acid. To his surprise, the drops sizzled, hissed and began eating away at the straps. “Use it all,” came the Headmaster’s voice. The straps pulled apart giving Anthony more arm room to work. He poured more of the potion on the straps and they hissed and sizzled soon breaking apart too. Anthony used the rest of the potion on the straps and soon was able to pull them all off of him. He stretched his arms and legs apart in relief.

“Thanks,” he muttered automatically. Anthony set the opened empty bottle back on the table.

“Open the door,” commanded the Headmaster. Anthony did as instructed. Paige stood across from the door, wand extended, pointed menacingly at him and ready for use.

“Come in,” called out the headmaster. “Both of you.”

Anthony backed warily away letting Paige enter the room. She kept her wand aimed at Anthony and looked wordless at the still smoking remains of the broken straps and the opened potions bottle. Then she looked expectantly at the portrait.

“There is no dark intent,” stated the Headmaster firmly. “And no need to keep your promise … today…”

“I am glad to hear that,” replied Paige coolly. She put her wand away.

Anthony breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn’t tried anything dark, but was now uncomfortably aware of what he was up against should he actually try something in the future… He’d have to take Paige out first and Anthony wasn’t sure he could do that. Fortunately, his plans did not lean in that direction…

“If the subject of poison mixing at H2 should ever again arise,” continued the Headmaster, “any such actual action was obviously a defensive measure initiated to use on an unknown kidnapper who could have appeared at any time.”

“Yes, of course,” murmured Paige. She looked again like her usual calm emotionless self.

Anthony nodded his head in agreement too. It was a good line. If only he had thought of it before Paige; he might have been able to convince her, but he doubted it. Paige was one of the best.

“…And I trust that what happened today will not be the subject of future conversations…”

“No,” agreed Paige softly. “It won’t.”

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“Thank you so much for coming to visit,” said Thackeray (Mrs. Margeray Thackeray.) She wore a shapeless floral pink print dress with a strand of pearls around her neck and smelled like some nauseating fake flower. Her white hair was tied up in a neat bun upon the top of her head with wispy white tendrils hanging down. “I don’t often get visitors,” she complained while she set out a tray with teacups on the table between them.

“Probably because you haven’t invited anyone,” answered Anthony Richards mentally.

Thackeray lived in an unplottable house. Paige sent her an owl requesting a visit. Anthony had no idea how the owl knew where to go. After a week, Thackeray sent Paige and Anthony an invitation to tea. Paige sent back a note of acceptance. Thackeray then met the two in Tom’s shop and Apparated them to her front door. That gave Anthony and Paige a location of sorts, but they could not gain access within without Thackeray’s help. Pulling out a huge key, Thackeray opened her front door and invited them in.

Now that Paige knew the location she could easily return that far, (Anthony, too, once he learned to Apparate,) but it would still require Thackeray to open the door and let them in. Bound by the magic of unplottable secrecy, neither Anthony nor Paige could reveal to others what they had learned. That was something only secret keepers could do.

“I’d have invited you over sooner, but those nosy Ministry officials kept on asking annoying questions; honestly, you’d think they thought my darling Nadia was responsible for the missing students,” she added conversationally. She wasn’t, of course; she wasn’t even there! But try to tell the Ministry that!” Thackeray complained. “They still think she’s involved!”

“That’s because she is involved somehow!” thought Anthony confidently. “You both are!” Everything pointed to them. But no one knew how it was done or why. And, of course, there wasn’t any proof…

“No doubt the Ministry is desperate to blame anyone to cover for their own ineptness,” said Paige smoothly. The Ministry didn’t know about Thackeray being Nellie. “There’s no need to tell them, yet,” Paige told Anthony. “There’s still a reward being offered…”

“Of course,” agreed Thackeray. “But I do wish they’d leave me alone and spend their time finding the real villains!”

“Ignore them,” suggested Paige calmly. “They’ll eventually go away… Unless you’ve something to hide…”

“No about that,” replied Thackeray. “But enough about me. I’ve heard such wonderful things about you and your potions,” Thackeray added as she distributed delicate porcelain teacups and saucers decorated with pink blossoms (apple—Anthony recognized them) to each of them placing the last in front of herself. “You can help anyone with your potions!” she continued admiringly.

“That depends on the situation,” murmured Paige. “There are limits.” Privately, Anthony doubted that. Paige was very good with potions.

Mrs. Thackeray picked up the matching teapot and began to pour. “And you!” she added turning her attention towards Anthony. “You did such a wonderful job saving all the students. That was positively masterful!”

Anthony could feel himself puff with pride. “Yes, thank you,” stated Anthony simply mindful of Paige’s direction to keep his responses “brief.”

Anthony couldn’t even begin to describe the joy and relief he’d felt when he spotted his parents, Tom and Paige in King’s Cross Station. His parents had welcomed him warmly with tears of joy; Tom had greeted Anthony with open pride. Paige had whispered, “Well done,” and then added, “Do you know why Potter’s popular? It’s because he doesn’t talk! Tell the Ministry what you have to, but keep your answers brief; Rita will take care of the rest…” And, because Paige’s advice had proven useful before, Anthony tried to heed those words as well. Rita’s resulting article was filled with words like “modest,” “unassuming,” “courageous,” “brave” and “heroic…”
I do apologize for interrupting your interview like that,” Thackeray added in a regretful tone. “That was your big chance for publicity and I’m afraid my little Nadia took away all the attention… Sugar?” she questioned as she set down her teapot.

“No thank you,” Paige answered.

“Please,” replied Anthony. Tea had been non-existent at H2 and sugar was always in short supply, usually repurposed from refreshed desserts.

“Most unfortunate,” Thackeray said while she dropped a lump of sugar in Anthony’s teacup. “Lemon?”

“No thank, you,” murmured Paige and Anthony shook his head as well. He’d drunk mostly hot lemon water in place of tea at H2 and welcomed any flavor change.

“I was hoping to do a bit of consultation, today,” Thackeray added. “If you have the time… It’s all confidential, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” answered Paige. “Is there a place where we can talk privately?” Anthony knew his presence would keep it from being legally confidential…

“For me?” questioned Thackeray. “Oh, my goodness, not for me! For Nadia!”

“Nadia? Has she been found?”

“Found?” Thackeray scoffed. “She was never lost!”

“But you said—”

“That was for the Ministry!” she said impatiently. “I couldn’t let her get into trouble…”

“You mean you interrupted my interview to look for someone who wasn’t missing?” interrupted Anthony angrily.

“Yes, of course!” agreed Thackeray without a hint of guilt. “I had to!”

“Why?” asked Anthony in disbelief. Just because he had used his wand to trip DeWitt causing DeWitt to spill the drinks he was carrying onto Thackeray’s dress forcing DeWitt to clean things up enabling Anthony to escape Thackeray and her boring photos—that was no reason for her to mess with his interview!

“If I didn’t show up when I did, those nosy Ministry officials would have eventually realized Nadia wasn’t at Hogwarts all this time and wondered why!”

“So?”

“They listed her with the rest of the missing students,” exclaimed Thackeray. “They’d want to know why I never corrected them.”

“Who cares!” retorted Anthony. “Attendance at Hogwarts isn’t mandatory!” How could she have made such a scene over nothing!

“Of course it isn’t,” agreed Thackeray, “but after that nastiness with all of you, they might think her absence was connected! It isn’t,” she assured them, “but they won’t take my word for that and would insist on talking to Nadia too.”

“And you don’t want them to?” questioned Paige aloud.

“No,” admitted Thackeray.

“Why?”

“My darling Nadia got into a bit of trouble over the summer and I don’t want the Ministry finding out… You won’t tell, will you?”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Nothing serious,” assured Thackeray dismissively, “but I couldn’t let her go to school that way and I didn’t want to highlight her problems by correcting the papers… You won’t tell them will you?”

“You surely don’t think we are the kind of people who run to the Ministry with every little infraction, do you?” questioned Paige disdainfully.

“Oh, no, of course not!” answered Thackeray. “It’s just that—”

“On the other hand, letting the Ministry spin it’s wheels needlessly looking for your granddaughter when they could be concentrating on criminals does seem a tad unfair…”

“True,” agreed Thackeray, “but I couldn’t let them see her now; she’d be in trouble for sure! That’s why I invited you over! I was thinking a potion or two would set her right and then we can
“We?”
“I’m willing to pay for your services, and discretion, of course,” said Thackeray.
“Of course,” agreed Paige. “But that assumes I can even help. Perhaps I should speak with her first…”
“Well, yes, I suppose that would be a good idea…” Thackeray set down her cup and saucer and stood. “She’s in her room…” Anthony stood as well.
“This way,” said Thackeray. And she walked out of the parlor. Paige and Anthony followed.

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“Nadia? Nadia dear!” called out Mrs. Thackeray as she opened a door. “Look who’s come to visit. It’s Mrs. Richards and her brother Anthony—you remember Anthony, don’t you? That’s why I invited Anthony,” Thackeray added as an aside to Paige Brenna Crowley. “I thought one of her friends visiting might help things out!”
“A likely story!” thought Paige critically. If she really wanted one of Turay’s friends, she would have invited a Ravenclaw… What did she really want with Anthony?

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After Anthony had identified Mrs. Thackeray as “Nellie,” Paige had done some research on her. There wasn’t much.
A wedding certificate at the Ministry revealed that a Margaret Moore married Arlin Thackeray. A Birth Certificate listed Reaghan Thackeray as their daughter. Margaret Moore (Mrs. Thackeray) seemed to be the only child of Hugh and Gwyndolin Moore. She had filed proper paperwork for inheritance purposes when her mother, Kennocha Sutherland, died and when her husband, Arlin Thackeray, died. Both deaths were listed as due to “magical” accidents. If the paperwork was accurate, Margaret Thackeray was 74 years old. All of that meant that Thackeray went about her daily business while avoiding the Ministry as much as possible. That was true of most Slytherins unless that business required dealing with the Ministry. Thackeray either had enough finances through her inheritances to live comfortably without outside employment or engaged in the kind of work kept hidden from Ministry eyes...
Then Paige looked up Nadia Turay. Anthony said that Turay was mousy and always kept in the shadows.
He said third year students reported she had never volunteered any answers in class nor provided information about herself to the other Ravenclaws. Paige found a Birth Certificate for Nadia Turay listing her parents as Reaghan and Hasani Turay. There was also a Death Certificate for Hasani Turay (died 11 years earlier by a Muggle related accident) and a Death Certificate for Reaghan Thackeray Turay (magic related accident less than a year ago.) Custody paperwork had been filed at that time granting Thackeray, the sole living relative, guardianship of Turay. Nadia was now aged 13.
The Daily Prophet said even less. Paige found a brief engagement announcement between Margaret Moore and Arlin Thackeray, a marriage photo of the happy couple and a short notice concerning the unexpected death of Arlin due to a magical accident, survived by his wife Margaret and his two-year-old daughter Reaghan. A single line reported Reaghan Turay’s death, and made no mention of the orphaned Nadia.

A quick check in Paige’s Lineage book showed the name Nadia Turay under that of Reaghan Thackeray indicating that Arlin Turay was either Muggle or Mudblood.

A princess style canopy bed filled the room. The lime green canopy netting surrounding the bed obscured the figure lying within. Thackeray drew her wand and pointed it at the netting. It parted silently on all sides and small green ties wrapped themselves around the netting to keep it in place on the posts.

“Very good,” thought Paige absently appreciating the silent spell work. But then, a lady of 74 had time to learn such things…

Paige stepped into the room behind Thackeray. She ignored the books and papers on the plain serviceable desk besides the bed and instead looked at the figure lying in the bed.

Turay looked nothing like her grandmother. Thackeray had pale white skin and straight silver hair while Nadia’s darker skin, not black or brown, but more a healthy golden tan though she probably had been nowhere near a sun in ages, showed up vividly against the lime green covers. A mass of frizzy black hair framed Nadia’s face. Her eyes were closed and she looked asleep.

Thackeray moved up and sat in a chair next to the bed; Paige and Anthony stepped forward too stopping at the bed, looking.

“She looks fine to me,” stated Anthony bluntly. “What’s wrong?”

“Wrong?” said Thackeray. “Isn’t it obvious? She won’t wake up!”

“How long has she been this way?” asked Paige. She reached out and picked up a limp wrist. Warm with a pulse. She was pale and thin, but not undernourished.

“Several months now,” answered Thackeray. “That’s why I know it has nothing to do with the unfortunate events at Hogwarts.”

Paige looked up with surprise. “Months?”

“I wanted to have a word with you about her during your reception, but there were too many people around…”

“Over half a year?” thought Paige in disbelief. No potion could do that, except maybe the Draught of Living Death and she’d show no pulse for that. “And later?” she asked aloud.

“I thought about talking with you later, but it seems you don’t make house calls…”

“Apprentice rules,” murmured Paige apologetically. That’s what strangers were told. She did make house calls but only under controlled circumstances and never alone. “But I’m sure I can get an exception made for you…” if she wanted.

“About that,” said Thackeray. “I’ve been asking around. No one seems to know who your Potions Master is… There’s some who doubt you even have one…”

“If you doubt my qualifications perhaps you should seek help elsewhere…” responded Paige smoothly while staring at Turay. Boot didn’t advertise his status as a Potions Master nor would Paige…

“Oh, no, no,” said Thackeray firmly. “I was just wondering…”

“What happened?” asked Anthony curiously changing the subject.

“I don’t know,” answered Thackeray returning her attention to Turay. “One day she didn’t come out for breakfast. I found her this way when I went to check on her…”

“What do you think happened?” clarified Paige.
“I don’t know,” repeated Thackeray blithely. “One day she didn’t come out for breakfast. I found her this way when I went to check on her…” Her blue eyes met Paige’s without a hint of guilt.

“That line won’t work with me!” Paige said icily. “You wouldn’t be so worried about the Ministry if you didn’t have some idea of what happened. And you wouldn’t approach me if you didn’t think there was some way of quietly fixing things… Either you tell me what’s going on, what’s really going on, or find someone else to help! And pay us well for our silence!” Paige added silently. There was a reward out for Turay’s return and it would take a lot of money before she advised Anthony (as an auror, she couldn’t claim it) to not step forward and claim it!

Thackeray’s body seemed to deflate. “You won’t tell will you?” she repeated with concern, “but my Nadia is a bit of a Dreamer…” she confessed in a whisper.

“Dreamer?” questioned Anthony.

“Yes, sometimes she dreams a little more than she should…”

“What kind of dreams?” asked Paige cautiously. There was dreaming and Dreaming. Like Animagus, there was a registry for Dreamers, or should be. No one admitted to being a Dreamer. Dream magic alone bordered on the illegal and Dreamers were tempted on some level to cross that line every time they went to sleep.

“Mostly she likes to sleep a lot—more than normal,” began Thackeray. “Sometimes I had to really work at getting her to wake. And Nadia would tell me all about some fantasy world she had dreamed about, one she didn’t want to leave—usually one where her mother, my Reagan, would visit and talk with her... I was hoping Hogwarts would help Nadia separate her dreams from reality,” Thackeray added. “Last year she came home all worried about that nasty business with the Hand,” Thackeray continued. “I kept telling her it was nothing but I guess I wasn’t able to reassure her enough. One day I couldn’t wake her at all…”

“So you think she created some dream world rather than face the reality of attending school?” asked Anthony.

“What else could it be?” stated Thackeray.

“Introspective Dreaming is not a matter of Ministry concern,” said Paige coolly. “What really has you worried?”

“Sometimes Nadia dreams a little more than she should…” Thackeray said rather timidly…

“Oh?”

“Sometimes it spills out into the real world…”

“How?”

“Nothing big,” she replied dismissively. “Every once in a while I would find things different around the house in the morning and Nadia would tell me how she dreamed about rearranging things.”

“Sleepwalking?” concluded Anthony.

“I’ve never actually seen her sleepwalk,” admitted Thackeray worriedly.

“What else?” persisted Paige. It was no big deal if Turay physically moved items while she sleptwalked but another matter altogether if she made use of magic to move things while sleeping.

“Sometimes she shapes things with her dreams…”

“She makes things while she dreams?” questioned Paige with concern. Making dreams tangible was something every person tried to do, just not while asleep. Doing it while asleep led to so many other illegal dream practices. Could Turay enter someone else’s dreams and/or influence them? Could she take the objects of someone else’s dreams and make them real? All of that was unlikely; she was too young, but the Ministry would want to know if someone like that was in their midst.

“She swears she doesn’t but I’m not so sure,” admitted Thackeray, “at least I’ve found things in her room that weren’t there when she went to bed the night before…”

“That’s not good,” observed Paige aloud.

“Exactly!” exclaimed Thackeray with obvious pleasure that Paige seemed to understand.

“Nadia knows she shouldn’t but sometimes, she can’t control herself…”

“So you think she’s done something like that this time?”

“I hope not, but the Ministry doesn’t know she’s a Dreamer and I would rather it stay that
way… For her sake.”

“What have you tried to do to wake her?”

“Well, shaking her, shouting and ice water didn’t work…” began Thackeray thoughtfully. “I
didn’t try too much else for fear of hurting my baby. I know she can wake up on her own, if I could
just get through to her… That’s why I’ve been talking and reading to her every day.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, yes! Everything and anything. Books, letters, news, the weather… I even make up
stories to tell her. She may look asleep, but I know my Nadia can hear me.

“Letters?” questioned Anthony curiously.

“Yes, of course,” answered Thackeray. She motioned to a stack of scrolls resting on the desk
between two piles of books. “I’ve saved every letter Nadia’s ever written to me and I read them back
to her so she can remember how much she’s missing by not waking up…”

“Food?” murmured Paige.

“Yes, of course!” Thackeray said sounding hurt at the suggestion. “Look at her!”

“I am,” replied Paige. “She looks far too healthy to have been in bed for six months…"

Muscles and muscle tone deteriorated without use…

“Yes, well I have been giving her some of this each day too…” Thackeray confessed. She
reached into a drawer and pulled out a potion bottle with a label Paige recognized as something used
to improve circulation.

“Yes,” Paige mused to herself, “that could account for her apparent health, but not all.”

Anything else?” she asked aloud.

Thackeray brought out a bottle of muscle toning and one intended to strengthen bones.
Collectively, the three could have been keeping up Turay’s physical health. Thackeray obviously
knew a lot about the body to know which potions to use…

“Anything else?” Paige questioned again.

“No,” answered Thackeray.

Paige waited accusingly to see if the silence caused her to spout anything else but nothing
happened. “I think I could develop something to help,” Paige told Thackeray speculatively. With a
lot of research… This was not her field, but Paige had access to the Auror Library. It surely
contained something about Dreamers. “But it would be very expensive…” Thackeray was not
related and Paige did not do charity cases.

“Yes, of course,” agreed Thackeray readily with a hint of relief while nodding her head up
and down. “And you won’t tell anyone?” she asked worriedly.

“More if you wish this all kept from the Ministry…” continued Paige firmly.

“That’s reasonable,” agreed Thackeray but there was this calculating gleam in her eye that
warned Paige she might try to “negotiate” a lesser fee…

“Very well,” said Paige. “I will think on this and get back to you… Next week? Same day and
time?”

“Yes, of course,” answered Thackeray happily. “I’ll be expecting you…”

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Mrs. Paige Brenna Crowley stood and stretched her legs. Business had been brisk; she had
several new clients. Tom’s shop had been busy too. Wizards and witches kept dropping by the shop
to see and congratulate Anthony on his marvelous job of leading the students out of H2. Anthony
positively exuded modesty, which caused even more people to stop by and see him. Most of the
well-wishers had made purchases as long as they were in the shop. DeWitt was too busy restocking
the shelves to look at his girlie magazines now.

The door to her potions shop opened. Wizard Terry Boot stepped in. “May I help you?” asked
Paige politely.

Boot held up a rolled parchment edged in Forest Green. “I’ve got this certificate that says I can
get a free potion sample of my choice,” he told her.
“Of course,” murmured Paige. “If you’ll come in I can show you what I have.” Boot stepped in further and closed the door behind him.

“You wanted to see me?” questioned Boot as he set the scroll down on the tiny table.

“I never said that,” denied Paige coolly.

“You never do anything without an ulterior motive,” Boot told her.

“It’s an excellent marketing strategy,” Paige replied referring to the numerous fliers she’d had Anthony pass around to all the shop owners that promised free potion samples if they would display her potion bottles prominently in their shop…

“And a way for me to visit you without attracting any attention,” finished Boot. “Like I would ever need one of your potions!” That was because he was supposed to be a Potions Master in his own right.

“It’s not as if you sit around making potions,” Paige replied.

“You know nothing about what I do,” Boot told her coldly. He turned and faced Page’s wall of sample potions. “I think this should do,” he told her while pulling off a potion labeled Dreamless. “I can put it next to the sympathy scrolls that no one buys,” he told her. “Good day.” He turned and reached out for the door handle.

“Spell Reversals!” Paige suddenly blurted. She hated having to ask for help, hated going to a Ravenclaw for that help and hated that he saw through her efforts at subterfusion so easily, but she still needed his help.


“There’s no books on them in the Auror Library.” Paige told him. The few books she had found mentioning Dreamers seemed to agree voices of people familiar, trusted and/or loved were the best, perhaps only, way to wake Dreamers who slept too long. Thackeray had been talking for half a year with no effect; obviously she was neither loved nor trusted enough to bring Turay out of her dreaming state or something else was wrong. Unfortunately, Anthony reported Turay had no close friends at Hogwarts they could turn to for help. There were, however several references about people who tried to augment their dream abilities through the use of spells… A dream-enhancing spell gone wrong was more in keeping with Thackeray’s reluctance to take Turay to the Hospital or inform the Ministry…

“That’s because they’re all in the office of Spell Reversals where they will be most used,” answered Boot looking back at her.

“That office is secured with several protective spells,” informed Paige. “How can I access the books without anyone knowing?”

“Why?”

Paige didn’t answer.

“Have you a new case?”

Paige stared at Boot stonily.

Boot sighed. His hand dropped from the doorknob. “Is it auror or business related?”

“I don’t know.” That all depended if a spell was actually used and what it was intended to do…

“If you really want to know about Spell Reversals, then I suggest you consult Mr. DeWitt,” stated Boot.

“DeWitt?”

“Yes, he’s been studying Spell Reversals all year.”

“He has?” questioned Paige in surprise.

“Yes.” Boot took a step back towards Paige. “Did you really think he was wasting his life reading Girlie magazines all day?” he asked while looking accusingly at Paige.

“Yes!” came Paige’s automatic, but mental, answer. And then, “He wasn’t?”

“We ask all our aurors to specialize in a specific magical branch so not only do we have aurors, but aurors able to meet every magical need that arises,” explained Boot.

“Why wasn’t I asked about specialties?” questioned Paige.

“There was no need,” he told her. “It was pretty obvious you’d be specializing in potions. It
took longer for DeWitt to decide,” Boot added. “Spell Reversals is an excellent field for him. He’s smart, careful and patient, all qualities necessary to thread through the intricate, often delicate, work of spell reversals. But reading a Spell Reversals book would not be in keeping with the character of a *lowly* shop employee so DeWitt bought a bunch of magazines with splashy covers to mask the cover of the books he was actually reading…”

“I had no idea,” whispered Paige involuntarily.

“I figured,” said Boot dryly. “You and Richards tend to keep to yourselves. If you decide this is an auror-related case then I shall expect a full report so we can pay you accordingly…”

Paige nodded. “And if it’s not?”

“If it’s not, then I expect you to compensate DeWitt for his worth, his full *Slytherin* worth for his assistance. If you don’t,” Boot warned, “then I shall ask the Ministry to take it out of your pay and give it to him! You treat DeWitt like dirt and pay him even less,” Boot continued sternly without giving Paige a chance to respond. “But he’s not dirt—he’s an auror, a colleague and your *equal*. DeWitt is a fine young man who could do anything he wished, start his own business, own his own shop, yet he persists in working for you. No, he’s never said a word against you or your treatment but we all know what it’s like. Have you any idea how many employment offers DeWitt has had to turn down, positions that promise careers, better salaries and more respect, just to keep working for you? The rest of the owners all wonder what *dirt* you have on DeWitt to keep him here! You and I know why he does it, but no one else does.” Boot looked down at the potion bottle in his hand.

“That’s why none of the other shop keepers have taken you up on your stupid promotional offer and won’t display your wares. Your poor treatment of DeWitt is unacceptable. I’ll display your bottle,” he told her, “that’s what the deal requires, but it won’t be opened.” Boot stepped back to the door, opened it and swiftly left without saying another word.

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Mrs. Paige Brenna Crowley stood on the front steps of the Thackeray residence. Anthony Richards stood at her side. Using her wand Paige caused the heavy ornate knocker attached to the door to rise up and down once. She heard the door unlatch and it slowly creaked open…

Thackeray stood on the other side. She wore another flower print dress, purple and lavender this time, and had her silver hair again neatly twisted up into a bun.

“May we come in?” asked Paige politely.

“Yes, of course…”


“This is DeWItt,” announced Paige imperiously. “He carries my things. What?” she added noting the confused look on Thackeray’s face. “You surely didn’t expect me or Anthony to, did you?” she questioned.

“What, oh, no! It’s just that, is he reliable?” Thackeray asked in a hushed whisper.

“I employ nothing less!” answered Paige firmly. “This may take a while,” Paige continued. “Shall we begin? May I see Turay?”

“Yes, of course.” Thackeray again led Paige to Turay’s room. Anthony and DeWitt followed. “What is in the bag?” Thackeray asked as they walked.

“The way to wake Turay,” answered Paige confidently. The four entered Turay’s room. It was rather crowded. Turay lay on her bed with eyes closed looking just as she had the previous week. “Oh, yes,” Paige continued. “My fee…” She handed Thackeray a small scroll tied in a lime green ribbon.

Thackeray slid the scroll from the ribbon, unrolled it and read the amount. “Yes, of course,” she agreed readily. “But only if my Nadia wakes today…”

“Of course,” Paige agreed as if it were a done deal. In truth, this was all totally experimental. “Over there,” Paige directed to DeWitt while nodding her head at the desk. DeWitt cleared away the books and scrolls and placed the bag on the desk. It clinked rather loudly sounding exceedingly full. “Sit her upright,” Paige commanded. DeWitt moved forward; he placed several nearby pillows beneath Turay’s back and gently slid her up into a more seated position. Then DeWitt straightened the covers and rearranged Turay’s arms so she looked comfortable. When he finished, DeWitt stepped back to the desk. He pulled out a tightly rolled scroll and a quill from his pocket and stood attentively next to the bag. Paige sat down in the chair next to Turay. “I’m ready,” Paige announced. Without looking at DeWitt, Paige extended one hand gracefully out towards him, palm up.

DeWitt opened the bag and brought out a small dark green jar. He looked at it briefly. “Honeysuckle,” Dewitt announced as he placed the jar in Paige’s hand.

“What is all this?” questioned Thackeray curiously.

“Scents,” said Paige proudly. She had spent the week collecting them. Paige passed the jar to Thackeray for her inspection. The top of the lid was neatly labeled: “Honeysuckle” as was the side of the jar. Normally, Paige liked her jars properly corked but opening such jars required a forceful tug or jerk that could result in accidentally injuring Turay. A Muggle-style lid that twisted open and shut was better suited for her needs today. “Talking doesn’t appear to be working, “ Paige reminded while Thackeray looked at the jar. “And she could choke on a potion in her state,” Paige added as she held out her hand expectantly for the return of the jar. “So we shall awaken her with a scent.” Thackeray returned the jar while Paige continued talking. “Scents are very powerful,” Paige informed Thackeray. “They can revive memories, signal danger, and soothe a tortured mind. Imagine what happens when you detect the scent of smoke; it alerts you to a fire; your whole body tenses and reacts to the danger. The right scent can break through any dream…” Paige assured Thackeray.

Paige placed the jar beneath Turay’s nostrils and carefully untwisted the cap. Immediately, a honey coloured cloud arose from the jar bringing with it the sweet scent of Honeysuckle flowers.
The cloud spilled out over Turay’s face and the honeysuckle scent filled the room. Paige studied Turay closely. There was no movement. “No, reaction,” Paige told DeWitt as she returned the cap to the jar twisting it tightly back on.

DeWitt used the quill and made a check mark on the scroll. “Got it,” he told Paige. He took the jar from Paige and placed it on the desk.

“Next?” Paige said as she again held out her hand.

“How do you know which scent?” questioned Thackeray curiously.

“I don’t,” answered Paige calmly. “It could be a scent she likes, or doesn’t like, something new or different or one that brings about childhood memories either good or bad… Remember that questionnaire I sent you?” Thackeray nodded. Paige had sent her questions concerning Turay’s life, where she lived, favorite foods, favorite activities… Thackeray had dutifully filled the questionnaire and returned it to Paige. “I’m starting with the scents related to your questionnaire,” she explained.

“For example, you said your daughter grew honeysuckles in her garden… In addition, I have collected as many other scents as possible and we shall try each one. One of these scents will trigger a reaction that will bring your granddaughter’s sleeping state back to the waking…” Paige told Thackeray confidently.

DeWitt pulled out a new jar and looked at the lid. “Roast Pork,” he announced as he placed the jar in her hand. Paige took the jar and held it under Turay’s nose. She unscrewed the lid and a cloud of brownish gray smoke came out and the most delicious smell of roast pork filled the room. Paige studied Turay closely. “No reaction,” she told DeWitt.

DeWitt pulled out a new jar and looked at the lid. “Gravy,” he announced as he handed the jar to Paige.

“What happens if the scents don’t work?” Thackeray questioned.

“They will,” Paige assured her as she placed the jar under Turay’s nose, “but it may take a combination of two or more scents to achieve awakening.” Paige opened the jar; a brownish cloud smelling of a rich pork gravy came out. Paige closed the jar. “No reaction,” she announced and held out the jar for DeWitt.

DeWitt pulled out a new jar and looked at the lid. “Smoke,” he announced as he handed the jar to Paige.

“What happens if the scents don’t work?” Thackeray questioned.

“They will,” Paige assured her as she placed the jar under Turay’s nose, “but it may take a combination of two or more scents to achieve awakening.” Paige opened the jar; a brownish cloud smelling of a rich pork gravy came out. Paige closed the jar. “No reaction,” she announced and held out the jar for DeWitt.

DeWitt placed a new jar in Paige’s hand. “Smoke,” he announced.

“What happens if the scents don’t work?” Thackeray questioned.

“Fireplaces,” said Paige firmly. “You never mentioned it, but there’s one at Hogwarts so it is surely a familiar scent…” She held the jar under Turay’s nose, twisted the lid and opened the jar. A thick cloud of black smoke spilled out.

Anthony started coughing. They all did. There was a lot of smoke in the jar. “Uh, perhaps it would be more comfortable if you and I waited outside,” suggested Anthony to Thackeray between coughs.

“No reaction,” said Paige firmly. She returned the jar to DeWitt. He placed a new jar in Paige’s hand. “Skunk,” he announced.

“Of course,” agreed Thackeray and the two swiftly left the room before Paige could open the jar…

The door to the room closed with Anthony and Thackeray on the other side. Paige swiftly unpinned the green spidersilk scarf at her neck. She rewrapped it around her nose and mouth using it as a gas mask/filter. At the same time, DeWitt drew his wand and cast a bubble headed charm. After first checking to see he was ready, Paige held the jar under Turay’s nose and opened it. A black and white cloud swirled out but neither Paige nor DeWitt smelled it. “No reaction,” she told Dewitt as she put the lid back on. He nodded. They didn’t expect any reaction. Paige drew her wand, “Muffliato!” she commanded encompassing the room effectively hiding their words from any outside listening. “Your turn,” she told him as she stood.

“I still think we should just take her to the Ministry,” stated DeWitt as he handed Paige his scroll and quill.

“That would be kidnapping,” Paige declared while she walked towards the door. “There is no evidence of any abuse or mis-treatment.”
“Other than the fact she won’t wake up?” Dewitt asked as he pulled a huge Spell Reversal Reference book from his pocket.

“Thackeray says it’s the child’s own doing,” reminded Paige as she seated herself comfortably on the floor. “There is no evidence to suggest otherwise.”

“Then why won’t she wake up?”

“That’s what we’re here to figure out.” Paige told him. “She is only a third year. Dreaming a fantasy world or casting a dream spell this powerful upon herself would be very difficult, if not impossible. So there is a strong probably that Thackeray did not tell us everything. She could have tried to cast a few spells of her own or done other things to try to wake the child.”

“Which is definitely child abuse,” stated DeWitt, “and reason to take her to the Ministry.”

“Not necessarily,” countered Paige. “What loving parent wouldn’t try to manage things on her own first?” she asked reasonably. “Besides, this is all conjecture on my part and not enough to warrant Ministry notification. Assuming it is even possible to remove Turay from this room,” (many parents put safety/protection spells on their children and/or around their children’s rooms) “what would happen next?” Paige pointed her wand at the bag. “Accio sewage!” she commanded. “The Ministry would take her to Spell Reversals and that’s you!” The desired jar floated out of the bag and into her waiting hand. “Why bother with all that red tape when it can be taken care of here and now?” she finished.

“But if I can’t do it?” DeWitt asked worriedly.

“Then you need to consider a different specialty!” Paige said firmly. She was still annoyed that DeWitt was using shop time to study right under her nose and she had never realized it!

Paige held the “Sewage” jar next to the crack at the bottom of the door and removed the lid. Hopefully, some of the scent would seep out convincing Thackeray it was better to stay outside than in. After that, it was Anthony’s job to keep her occupied, questions, photo albums, stories about H2, whatever it took to keep her outside so they could work undisturbed and unobserved.

Page closed the “Sewage” jar. She placed a check besides it on the scroll. “Wingardium Leviosa,” she commanded and pointed the floating jar back towards the desk next to the other opened jars. All Paige would have to do was stand and say DeWitt was opening the jars should Thackeray enter unexpectedly. Paige pointed her wand at the bag. “Accio jar!” she commanded. Another jar floated out of the bag and into her waiting hand. “Why bother with all that red tape when it can be taken care of here and now?” she finished.

Meanwhile, DeWitt had begun muttering some incantations of his own. Presumably reversal type spells. It would be interesting to watch DeWitt work, but Paige had her own responsibility—releasing scents at regular intervals to convince Thackeray all they were doing was testing scents...

Paige released the pine scent near the door. There was enough scent to fill the room without the scent being directly under Turay’s nose. If there was a reaction, DeWitt was sure to notice and inform her. She closed the jar, marked the scroll and sent the jar back to the desk. Another jar flew out of the bag and into her waiting hand. “Summer rain.”

DeWitt continued muttering spells. Obviously no reaction. Paige checked the scent off on her list and returned the jar to the desk. She caused a new one to fly to her hands... “Muggle Air Pollution.” And then another, and another...

“I’m sure I did it right!” Dewitt said with frustration. “But she’s not waking!”

“You did,” assured Paige as she opened a jar labeled, “Ammonia.” Not a common scent but Ammonia was often used with various salts to arouse consciousness; it was worth a try... DeWitt may be slower than she, but he was careful and precise. There was no way he had made a mistake. “Consider there is more than one spell to reverse and repeat what you have done or look for another spell to reverse,” she suggested. No reaction. Paige closed the jar and checked it off on her spell list...

“That’s not the way it works!” protested DeWitt. “There should be some sort of reaction or response as the spells reverse and there’s nothing!”

Paige sent the jar back to the desk while she considered DeWitt’s words. “Then talk to her,” she suggested. Perhaps Thackeray’s voice was not the one she needed to hear. “Accio Jar!” she said pointing her wand at the bag. A new jar floated out and into her hand.
Behind her DeWitt started talking. “Wake up, Nadia, please!” he begged. “You’ve been asleep for ever so long…”

Paige opened the jar she held; a new aroma filled the room. Abruptly Paige heard the sound of a cough. She looked over at the bed. Turay was coughing! Paige looked down at the lid of the jar she held. “Chocolate chip biscuit!” “Chocolate,” she said aloud. Suddenly the doorknob turned. Paige hastily stood and slid her scarf down off her face as the door pushed open breaking the muffliato spell in the process.

“Oh, you’ve done it!” Thackeray gushed as she rushed in. “My baby’s awake again! Nadia, Nadia my dear! You’re awake!” Thackeray pushed past DeWitt (bubble head charm gone) and knelt over the bed giving Turay a motherly bear hug.

“The bird in the cuckoo clock started chirping and she literally jumped up and ran to the room!” murmured Anthony in Paige’s ear. “I couldn’t stop her!” he added apologetically.

“Nadia, my dear,” Thackeray said, “don’t ever do that to me again! I was so worried! If you don’t want to go to Hogwarts, you don’t have to,” she added. “Just don’t ever go away from me like that again…”

“Chocolate chip biscuit,” said Paige aloud with confidence. “No one can resist chocolate.” She stepped up to the bed. “How are you feeling?” she asked Turay. Turay looked back at Paige with wide brown eyes without speaking. Was it shyness or something else? “She needs to be checked by a proper healer,” Paige told Thackeray. “That length of inactivity is bound to have some residual effects…”

“Oh, no!” Thackeray exclaimed. “My Nadia is just fine now that she’s awake…”

“As you wish,” replied Paige calmly.

“Smile!” said Anthony. He had squished past DeWitt and pointed a camera at Turay with Thackeray embracing her. He snapped off several pictures in rapid succession before Thackeray realized what had happened.

“What are you doing!” she exclaimed.

“Proof!” replied Anthony cheerfully. “It’s been nice visiting with you,” he continued politely, “but if you’ll excuse me, I have to go…” Anthony gave a courteous bow and stepped quickly from the room.

“Wait!” called out Thackeray. “What do you think you are doing?” She released Turay, hastily stood and started towards the door.

“Claiming the reward, I expect,” answered Paige calmly bringing Thackeray to a stop. The sound of the outside door opening and closing could be easily heard in the background.

“Reward? What reward?” exclaimed Thackeray indignantly.

“The one promising to pay for information leading to the whereabouts and/or safe return of Miss Turay,” answered Paige.

“But he can’t do that!”

“Of course he can,” argued Paige reasonably. “He is not in my employment nor is he bound by any rules of confidentiality,” explained Paige. “It’s a rather large sum,” she added conversationally. “Used wisely, it should do much towards launching Anthony in any career he desires.” A tearful Thackeray had posted the reward no doubt never expecting to pay, as she already knew the whereabouts of Turay… “Anthony will cook up some story that leaves both DeWitt and myself out of the picture so you needn’t worry about the Ministry coming to us for confidential information,” Paige continued.

“I won’t let him!” Thackeray said angrily.

“You can’t stop him,” replied Paige serenely. There were ways, but only if Thackeray thought of them…

“No,” argued Thackeray thoughtfully while drawing her wand, “he gets nothing if I get there first!”

“You can’t,” replied Paige urbanely. “She’s too young to Apparate safely.”

“Apparate, no, but portkeys!” Thackeray muttered to herself. “She can do that!”

“I don’t believe you can use a portkey to get into the Ministry…” volunteered Paige.
informatively. “It’s a security thing…”

“Maybe,” agreed Thackeray thoughtfully, “but we can get to St Mungo’s. Definitely St. Mungo’s.” She pointed her wand at the nearest book on the desk. It glowed briefly and again looked like a regular book. “Accio purse!” Thackeray commanded pointing her wand out the bedroom door. An old-fashioned leather bag zoomed into her hand. “Come along Nadia dear,” Thackeray said as she returned to the bed and scooped Turay up in her arms. “It’s time for you to leave!” she commanded directing her icy blue eyes at Paige.

“No,” said Paige. “You haven’t paid me yet!”

“Paid you?” snarled Thackeray. “Never! You planned this!”

“Without proper payment, you won’t be my client and I’ll be free to report the rest of the events of today,” replied Paige calmly while ignoring her accusation. Of course she had planned it. She was Slytherin! What did Thackeray expect?

“Very well, I’ll pay you,” promised Thackeray grudgingly. “But not now. My Nadia’s health comes first. She needs to be checked out by the healers, immediately!” Thackeray added piously. “You can’t expect me to worry about money at a time like this!”

“Of course,” agreed Paige. “Tomorrow morning then? Tom’s shop?”

“Tomorrow!” agreed Thackeray. “Now, out!”

“Of course. DeWitt!” Paige commanded. Dewitt, who had been quietly returning the jars to the bag during the discussion, lifted the bag and followed Paige out the room. “A pleasure doing business with you,” Paige said as they walked to the door. “Good day.”

Thackeray watched while they exited the house and closed the door behind them.

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“I told you she’d take her to the healers,” Paige said to DeWitt as they stepped off Thackeray’s front porch.

“But only because you blackmailed her into it,” agreed DeWitt reluctantly.

“Some people just need to be reminded of their … priorities more than others,” replied Paige calmly while drawing her wand. “I’ll see you back at the shop,” she added and Apparated.

**********

Bright and early the next morning Mrs. Thackeray walked into Tom’s store. Tom was off finding new merchandise in Scotland. Anthony and DeWitt were taking inventory in the storeroom. Paige Crowley was watching the shop.

“Congratulations on the return of your Granddaughter,” greeted Paige pleasantly as if all she knew was what was written in the headlines of the *Prophet* that morning and the Special Edition issued the night before… According to the papers, Turay had just appeared on Thackeray’s doorstep having taken a Grand Tour of Europe. She knew she would be in trouble for bunking class at Hogwarts but was hoping her grandmother would be in a more forgiving mood around the holidays...

“Thank you,” said Thackeray in a pleased sounding voice. “We’re all so glad to have her back…” According to the news, Turay had wandered the streets living among Muggles which explained why she never knew about the Hogwarts kidnapping or that she was considered one of the victims. Thackeray pulled a scented plumeria hair clip off the shelf. “I think I’ll get her this,” she told Paige aloud. “She needs something that smells nice after living with all those dirty Muggles!”

“Certainly,” said Paige. “Anything else?”

“No,” said Thackeray, “not today.”

“That will be ten knuts.”

Thackeray watched while they exited the house and closed the door behind them.

Paige eyed the bag suspiciously. “I hope that is the agreed upon amount in full,” she began calmly, “or I will be free to report my version of things which is rather different from the one I read
in the *Prophet.*”

That cheerful smile left Thackeray’s face. “It’s all there!” she assured Paige. “Minus 20% for the troubles Richards caused with his attempt to claim the reward! *You* put him up to that!”

“Which would have never been possible had you notified the Ministry Turay was never a Hogwarts student and was instead safe at home.” replied Paige calmly.

“They made her stay overnight!” Thackeray hissed. “Have you any idea how dangerous that is for a Dreamer! She might have been discovered!”

“Turay has been attending Hogwarts for two years and never once did the other Ravenclaw students suspect she was a Dreamer,” informed Paige. Anthony was adamant about that… “The chance of discovery was minimal! Pay in full!” Paige added hardening her voice, “or Anthony will tell the Ministry a different story about Turay’s disappearance and have *photos* to prove it!” she threatened.

Thackeray’s face hardened but she withdrew a smaller bag and placed it next to the first. She’d been prepared if Paige insisted on the full amount. Paige could tell Thackeray was very angry, but she’d get over it. It was only money.

“Thank you,” said Paige calmly. “There’s no charge for the flower,” she added, knowing not to push her luck. “It’ll look good in her hair.”

Thackeray grunted and turned to leave. “Mrs. Thackeray!” Paige called out. She stopped, turned and looked at Paige. “It wasn’t the scent that did it,” Paige told her, “but DeWitt!”

“Huh?”

“It took only a few words to wake her, words from a *Hufflepuff*, a Hufflepuff *male*! You may consider Turay your “darling Nadia,” but it is clear you are less than that to her! I don’t hold with child abuse,” Paige continued. “Six months trapped in a room listening to an undesirable voice sounds a lot like *torture* to me. I’ll be watching,” Paige told Thackeray, “*Dear* Nadia had better be on that train with the rest of the Hogwarts students or I’ll be visiting Child Services and suggest Nadia is remaining behind for some reason *other* than a bit of homeschooling!”

The moment she had become an auror, Paige had pulled all the paperwork she could find concerning the Ministry investigation into Aunty D.—Delores Umbridge. Among other things, Aunty D. had apparently sent all sorts of notices to Child Services in an effort to separate Wycliff from Potter’s control. The efforts had failed, barely. However, it highlighted the power and persistence of the department; Thackeray would not want that kind of scrutiny.

Thackeray turned and walked out without comment. She’d be back: the next time she needed something confidential…

“We’re finished with the storeroom. Do you need anything else?” asked DeWitt respectfully.

“No,” answered Paige. DeWitt and Anthony had been standing quietly at the storeroom entry. DeWitt had his wand out. It was a casual stance but he was no doubt ready to assist should things turn ugly with Thackeray. “I’ll be opening my shop,” she told them. “You can take over here.”

“Yes, mum,” he said respectfully. He pocketed his wand and came to the counter. Anthony followed.

“What’s this?” questioned Anthony looking at the two bags of money on the counter.

“Thackeray’s payment,” said Paige coolly. “This one’s yours,” she added handing Anthony the smaller bag. He’d earned it.

“Thanks!” said Anthony cheerfully while taking the bag.

“The other one’s yours,” Paige told DeWitt.

“Mine?” he asked in surprise.

“Yes,” she said. “It was your words that woke Turay. You’ve earned it.”

“No, thank you,” he said politely. “I didn’t do it for pay.”

Paige mentally rolled her eyes. One of those philanthropic Do-gooders! Boot was wrong. DeWitt would never be a success at business; he’d never be able to charge enough to pay the rent let alone support himself or a family…

“Then a charity of your choosing,” suggested Paige. “I’m sure you know someone or a group in need…” *Like yourself?* It wouldn’t do to let DeWitt walk away without the money; Boot was
bound to find out and dock her pay for sure.

“I suppose I do,” agreed DeWitt with reluctance. “But only if you let me use your name as the donor…”

“No,” refused Paige. That would defeat the purpose of giving the money to DeWitt. “Make it anonymous,” decided Paige aloud. It was the best she could come up with under the circumstances.

“Yes, mum. I know some people who could do with a bit of Holiday cheer… It won’t be wasted,” he assured her. DeWitt lifted the other bag and put it under his robe. “Thank you, mum.”

“Thank you for your assistance.” “What a waste!” thought Paige with disgust. Perhaps DeWitt’ll come to his senses and keep some or all of it once he sees the amount, but Paige doubted it. Some people never learned.

************
“To family!”

“To family!” said Vernon Wycliff as he raised up his wine glass filled with sparkling pear juice. He clinked his glass lightly against those around him and then drank. Family. The one they still had—old members and new. It was Christmas Eve and Vernon was sitting at the dining room table filled with food surrounded by—more people than he could ever remember at his table before.

Father and mum, of course. Father walked straight and tall with more confidence than when Vernon had first arrived from Smeltings. Mum hummed all the time.

Holly walked about as if spending three months in captivity were no big deal. Perhaps it wasn’t compared to the other things she had gone through…

Kenny was there this year too. He wore a formal suit for the occasion. Vernon wasn’t sure he liked the way Kenny kept on looking at Holly, but at least he wasn’t some drunken bum that had run her over…

Miranda insisted on coming as soon as she heard Holly had returned. She was visibly glad to see Holly but terribly frustrated at Holly’s vague responses as to what had happened. Vernon didn’t know how much longer he’d be able to see Miranda without explaining things. But he didn’t know if he could or should open up more…

Grandfather and Grandmum were there too. Of everyone, they acted the most normal, but then, they didn’t know about Holly being missing in the first place. They looked suspiciously at Miranda, though. She wore a trim black lacy dress with fingerless black lace gloves. No vampire teeth, though, she didn’t like to eat food with them, nor was her face the usual pasty white. It was pretty sedate for Miranda.

By far, the most unusual person at their meal was Aunt Marge, or more accurately, Great Aunt Marge, as she was Grandfather’s sister. Vernon couldn’t remember her from before. Apparently mum and dad quit visiting Aunt Marge when she started mixing up names. Last winter Vernon had helped the family box up Aunt Marge’s things and put them in storage so she could live with his grandparents.

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Aunt Marge had spilled out of their grandparents’ car like a huge bowling ball. Her brindle red and white bulldog shot out of the car over Aunt Marge like a rocket and headed straight for Holly’s cat. The cat took one look at the dog and headed up the nearest tree.

“Dudley!” she exclaimed happily while thundering straight towards Vernon. “My little neffy poo!” she added wrapping her thick beefy arms around Vernon in a tight hug. “You are looking more handsome than ever! How’s school?”

“Oh, fine?” said Vernon uncertainly uncomfortably aware of the smothered giggles coming from Holly next to him.

Then Vernon felt something pushed into his unresisting hand—looking down, he saw a crisp new twenty-pound bill.

“Thanks!” he added more enthusiastically.

Aunt Marge released Vernon and turned her attention to Holly. “You look like that tart who ran off with the bum!”

she said critically.

“That’s no tart!” corrected Grandmum coming forward, “but my granddaughter, your niece, Holly,” she told her.

“Remember? I said we had two grandchildren. How are you, dear,” she added lovingly
giving Holly a warm hug, which
Holly returned enthusiastically. “Holly, this is your Aunt Marge.”
Holly released Grandmum and faced Aunt Marge. “Um, pleased to meet you,” said Holly. She dipped down making
the motions of a curtsey.
Aunt Marge sniffed. “Well, I suppose blood is better than looks,” she said grudgingly.
“But she still looks like that
tart and why on earth did you let her get that ghastly tattoo!” Holly immediately hid the back
of her hand beneath her
other hand self-consciously. “She’s my granddaughter, not daughter,” reminded Grandmum.
“And blood is everything!”
she said proudly hugging Holly again.
“I love you, grandmum!” Holly whispered in her ear. At which point mum and father came up...

When I look around this table,” began Aunt Marge as she refilled her wine glass. It was the
fourth or fifth refill counting all the pre-dinner drinks. “I realize how lucky I am.” She sniffed and
used her napkin to wipe her eyes. “I came near to losing it all.” She looked mostly at Holly as she
spoke. Holly, who, as Vernon knew, looked a lot like Harry Potter’s mum, dipped her head down
hiding her face behind her braid and hair.
“Really?” asked Miranda politely. “How?” Vernon had warned Miranda that Aunt Marge was
a little batty and to not take her seriously but would that be enough?
Aunt Marge looked hesitantly around the table first and then, having made up her mind,
lowered her voice, “That Potter gang almost got me!” she whispered fearfully.
“Gang?”
“Yes! They’ve been after me for years and they nearly got me!”
“They did?” questioned Miranda with wide eyes. “What happened?”
“I got this phone call,” began Aunt Marge. “And the voice on the other end asked, very polite
like, if I happened to know of someone named Harry Potter!”
“And did you?”
“Not that I’d admit to—I mean you don’t admit to skeletons in the closet to some stranger off
the street let alone some voice over the phone!”
“So?”
“So, I said “no,” of course and promptly hung up,” said Aunt Marge. “But then I got to
thinking… Anyone who knows Harry knows he’s in the Wakefield where he belongs!”
“Wakefield,” thought Vernon, “that was a prison in Yorkshire.”
“So it wasn’t Harry the voice was after!” continued Aunt Marge. “No! That voice was
looking for people who knew Harry! And who would care about that? I ask you? Only Potter’s
gang! That’s who! They weren’t arrested and thrown in gaol! Harry promised revenge on everyone
who put him away and their families and his gang is determined to do the job for him!”
“We’re all very glad you’re here with us,” interrupted mum. “Did you see the weather report?”
she added. “They think it’ll snow tonight. Could you pass me the potatoes, please?” Potatoes were
next to Aunt Marge. Mum was no doubt aware, as the rest of them were, well not Miranda, that
Cousin Harry was not in gaol and Aunt Marge was spouting a bunch of lies fed to her ages ago to
explain a name change...
“I keep telling you, there’s no gang, Marge,” said grandfather mildly. He grabbed the bowl of
potatoes from in front of Aunt Marge. “Just Harry and you needn’t worry about him!” Grandfather
took a huge spoonful of mashed potatoes, plopped them on his plate and then passed the bowl to
mum. It was clear no one had tried to correct things for Aunt Marge; perhaps they never intended to...
“You probably heard the name wrong—Larry or Mary and there are lots of Potters out there,” added grandmum.

“Gravy? Anyone?” questioned mum again trying to interrupt the conversation.

“I know what I heard,” insisted Aunt Marge. “Harry Potter, he said! Just saying the name gives me chills all over!”

“Why is ah, Harry Potter, after you?” asked Kenny. Kenny knew Cousin Harry, but not about the stories fed to Aunt Marge...

“Because Vernon here did his duty and helped put their ring leader, Harry Potter, away!” explained Aunt Marge proudly. Aunt Marge patted Grandfather’s back, sloshing wine out of her glass as she spoke. He choked on his food, or was it at the explanation Aunt Marge had just given.

“He did?” questioned Kenny with interest!

“This is not appropriate dinner conversation!” said mum sternly. “Are you still breeding bulldogs?” she asked again trying to change the subject.

“You’re absolutely right,” agreed Aunt Marge loudly. “The table is no place to discuss vicious mass murderers but that’s what Harry Potter was! Bad blood from a bad egg!”

“Mass murderers!” questioned Miranda with wide eyes.

“That was a long time ago!” insisted grandfather. “We’ve nothing to worry about now!”

“Nothing? Who was it that said revenge is a dish best served cold?” questioned Aunt Marge. “You musn’t relax your guard now!” she insisted. “They’re still out there! Still looking! Now is when you have to worry most! The children have to be warned!”

“We have been,” interrupted Holly, “warned,” she added. “And I take that warning very seriously. Why do you think I do Tang Soo Do?”

“You do what?” asked Aunt Marge, confused.

“Karate,” clarified Holly. “I practice it every day, Vernon and I both do,” she told Aunt Marge. “I’m a black belt!” Holly added proudly. “But that doesn’t stop me from being careful,” she continued. “I’m always on the lookout for strange faces and things that don’t belong! I don’t even carry a cell phone in case it could be used to trace me! Thanks so much for worrying and reminding us to be careful…”

“Well…” Aunt Marge was clearly surprised Holly was agreeing with her.

“Your dog, Ripper?” Holly added smoothly. “Did you breed him yourself? He’s very handsome!”

“Uh, yes,” said Aunt Marge proudly. “Yes, I did!”

“And train him? He’s very polite.” The dog wouldn’t give Vernon the time of day and never left Holly’s side. Was that because she smelled of cat?

“Yes!” Aunt Marge puffed up a bit as she spoke.

“You are so talented!” Holly said admiringly. Aunt Marge puffed up more. “I don’t know a thing about dogs,” Holly added. “What made you choose to breed bulldogs?”

And Aunt Marge launched into a long-winded description of the merits of bulldogs over other breeds… Cousin Harry forgotten, almost.

Kenny grabbed some dishes and helped Vernon clear the table at the end of the meal. He pulled Vernon aside. “Does Mr. Potter know he’s supposed to be in gaol?” Kenny questioned with a serious look on his face.

“No!” whispered Vernon vehemently, “and don’t tell him!”

Miranda came up with several plates of her own. Vernon tensed for a stack of questions.

“Your family is very interesting,” was all she said with a smile on her lips. Was that good or bad? Vernon didn’t know but he decided to not ask.

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“Merry Christmas,” said Mrs. Paige Brennan Crowley in a pleasant sounding voice.

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” said DeWitt. “What’s this?” he asked looking at the green leather bag Paige had placed on the counter.
“Your Christmas bonus,” answered Paige coolly. “I believe it is customary to give one’s employees, one’s valued employees, a bonus of some sort during the holidays.” DeWitt couldn’t refuse it without looking out of place with other employees on Diagon Alley.

“Oh, uh, thanks,” said DeWitt uncertainly. He was obviously not expecting anything. He reached out and hesitantly took the bag. “I, uh, didn’t get you anything…” he said guiltily.

“It wasn’t necessary,” assured Paige. “I’m the employer here not you. Have a nice evening,” she told him.

“Oh, yeah,” said DeWitt, “You too!” He turned and headed towards the door.

“Oh, DeWitt,” called out Paige authoritatively.

He stopped and turned. “Yes, mum?”

“As long as you persist in reading books on Spell Reversal on my time, perhaps you should put some of that knowledge to practical use!”

“Mum?” he asked clearly confused.

“I believe there’s enough space in the storage room to create an extra room and a door to the outside for privacy, if you wish,” she told him. “At a rent of one knut. You can charge your clients whatever you wish and keep the proceeds,” Paige added. “We’ll discuss your hours later, when you are ready to open…” she finished.

“Yes, ma’am!” said DeWitt. “Thank you!” he added cheerfully. It could have been her imagination, but DeWitt seemed to bounce the rest of the way out of the store.

**********

Holly Wycliff sighed and shifted restlessly on the heavy stone bench trying to find a more comfortable position. It didn’t work. She squirmed around some more. Holly was bored. The Hufflepuffs had been apparently trying to get some keys from Gringotts. The goblins had always refused to even discuss things. Shortly after the return of the students, the goblins sent word they would be willing to consider negotiations, but only if Holly were included in the negotiations team. Actually, they said something more like, “only if the “wandless wand carrier from whom blood has been taken” came too.

Accordingly the Hufflepuffs contacted Cousin Harry who then relayed the request to Holly and her father. Cousin Harry made no recommendation one way or the other, but as the Hufflepuffs had done so much for Holly, she felt obliged to return the help… It was also terribly flattering to be requested like that.

The reality was much less exciting. It was cold and boring! The Goblins never had any intention of saying “yes” to anything; Holly could tell that from the moment they walked into the room.

The goblins had selected an abandoned underground Muggle air raid shelter as a location for negotiations. The place was definitely neutral territory but one that was more comfortable to goblins than Hufflepuffs.

The Hufflepuff negotiating team (Floren Fortescue, Witch Malkin or Madam Malkin as she liked to be referred, Zacharias Smith, Roland DeWitt and Holly) had braved the wintry weather (a light but steady snowfall) and arrived early. The actual negotiators were Wizard Fortescue, Wizard Smith and Madam Malkin. Holly knew them from last year when they helped her develop a plan to deal with Sir. Roland DeWitt was along as “security,” but actually it was because Cousin Harry insisted; he wouldn’t let Holly near any goblins without an escort: someone he knew and trusted. Four torches, one on each corner immediately lit up upon their arrival. Inside was a solid stone table with a tiny stone bench on each side. The bench wasn’t large enough for everyone. There was a solid looking metal door on the opposite side of the shelter.

The place looked and felt empty but Roland drew out his wand anyway. He was taking his responsibilities seriously. “Homenun Revealo” he shouted while aiming the wand around the room. It wouldn’t do if someone were hiding ready to listen in or attack. It also eased Holly’s worries about people present she couldn’t see or sense… Holly could sense the emotions of the four Hufflepuffs
present with varying degrees of intensity. Roland could totally blank out his emotions, as required by
the Ministry, but he had also learned to drop that focus when around Holly. “All clear,” he told the
rest but he kept his wand out ready for further use.

The five stomped the snow off their shoes as they entered the room. Their footsteps echoed
loudly. Holly drew her robes about her tightly as she walked about. The interior of the shelter was
cold and damp—not quite as cold as the outside winter weather, but close. Holly missed the heavy
blue curtain robe she’d had at H2. It would have taken a big bite out of the cold. She would have
worn it but this was a Hufflepuff operation and a traditional black robe was more in keeping with
Hufflepuff colours.

Wizard Fortescue moved up and sat down on the bench. A second bench immediately
appeared behind it. “An extendable room,” Roland explained to Holly. He sat down on the second
bench; Holly sat down next to him. A third bench materialized behind them.

Abruptly metal door swung open loudly creaking as it moved and the goblins proudly walked
in, and in and in. They came in by twos and threes dressed alike wearing bright orange jackets with
gold buttons and gold pants and bare feet. They projected a wall of hatred, disgust, disdain,
arrogance and confidence! The intensity of their emotions forced Holly to block immediately. The
first goblin sat down at the lone bench on the other side of the table. Four sat on the bench that
immediately appeared behind the first bench and the rest took up more benches behind the first
two… They moved so swiftly Holly wasn’t even sure of how many there were.

Once everyone had seated, the lead goblin started with a list of demands; items that had to be
returned as part of the agreement. “Return the tiara set with moonstones and diamonds; return the
silver sword of set with rubies; return the silver tea set inlaid with gold and onyx; return the silver
dagger set with sapphires and emeralds; return the set of six gold goblets set with emeralds…” The
list seemed to go on forever!

While the goblin’s voice droned on, Holly mentally braced herself and unblocked. She
couldn’t bear to block for long; it made her feel exposed and vulnerable. Holly focused her attention
on all the new emotions, those coming from the goblins. They were strong, but not filled with the
blinding murderous rage of the previous year. Holly sorted out the emotions as best she could. They
were very similar and it took a while to ferret out differences that made the goblins individuals
instead of a united body.

Eventually Holly counted seventeen different goblin emotions. All male, maybe. Holly
suddenly realized she’d never met a female goblin from which to compare the differences. Were there
even female goblins? Holly had no idea. The seventeen were all adults, of similar ages too, maybe.
Holly had never seen a young goblin; surely they had children, and old people… She couldn’t
exactly place emotions with faces, either, as the goblins were all seated tightly bunched on four
benches. Holly couldn’t even see the faces of the ones in the back two rows let alone identify who
was who.

The goblins were all strangers to Holly, all except one: Gottenram, president of Gringotts!
Holly remembered him well. He had been a victim of Sir’s anger and horribly tortured. He had also
nearly killed Holly last year! Where was he? Holly hadn’t seen him walk in, but she had been busy
trying to block at the time. Nor could she see him sitting in front or in the first two rows so he must
be in one of the back rows hidden behind the others, within the group. Gottenram still hurt, but not
nearly as much as he had last year. So Holly spent time studying and memorizing his symptoms so
she could relate them to Paige. She’d get Paige to make more “pills” to help him. Holly intended to
give the “pills” to Cousin Harry; he would find a way to get them to Gottenram…

After that, Holly sat with Roland on the second bench and looked for ways to stay awake…

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Roland DeWitt clutched his wand tightly and watched the goblins warily. They were up to
something, he was sure of it, but what? Several Hufflepuff witches and wizards had lost their lives
during the days of Lord Voldemort, more accurately, they had vanished with no trace never
returning. Many had vanished taking with them their key to their Gringotts’ vault. Though legally declared dead, the bankers at Gringotts refused to release the contents of family vaults to relatives or even acknowledge any vault existed. On behalf of the families, the Hufflepuffs had been trying to get the keys for years and the goblins had consistently ignored them. Now, suddenly they wanted to talk—but only if Holly were there? Holly had to be the key. She was the only thing different in the equation. What did they want with Holly?

When the goblins first sent word they were willing to negotiate if Holly were present, the Hufflepuff elders had met to consider the situation. They wanted the keys, but not if it endangered one of their own. The elder Hufflepuffs invited Roland and Rupert to attend their meeting as they had worked with Holly in the past. They also included Head Girl, Jennifer Woods. Jennifer had the most recent information about Holly. Jennifer said a lot of things of their experiences at H2 that had never made it to the Ministry account or the newspapers. None of it was good. Suicide watches? How could they have let Holly reach such depths? Roland worried. Should Mr. Potter be informed? Should her parents? Was she out of danger now that she was free?

Maybe, maybe not. At any rate, the Hufflepuffs would not let past activities impede Holly from participating within their community, if she so wished. Nor would they knowingly place her in a risky situation without adequate support. Roland was already going along as “security” long before Mr. Potter’s request…

Holly looked and seemed fine to Roland when she arrived for the meeting. Hopefully, all that worry was for nothing.

The goblins were all so stern and grim. What were they thinking? It couldn’t be too bad; Holly had started to squirm restlessly in her seat. She wouldn’t do that if she perceived their emotions to be dangerous or deadly. And the goblins were all so motionless! How could they sit there so long without moving? Why? And what was with the same clothing? Goblins usually wore a variety of bright colours. Were the same outfits a negotiating thing or something else? Roland wished he could stand against the wall on one side where he could look out over everyone. But after all the goblins moved in, he decided it would be wiser to be in a location where he could cast a shield spell over everyone or Apparate people if necessary.

The lead goblin (name unknown; Roland didn’t recognize the goblin and no formal introductions were made before he had started in on his demands) fell silent. About time. He’d been talking for nearly three hours demanding the return of goblin-made items. It would never happen; surely the goblins knew that. Why make the demands?

Madam Malkin stirred and cleared her throat. “That was a very long list,” she began. “Unfortunately, some of the things you mentioned are not ours to, uh, return… Perhaps there is something else we could do…”

The goblin stared at Madam Malkin with unblinking eyes a moment before speaking. “Then we have nothing to discuss,” he said imperiously. “This negotiation is over.” He stood. As one, goblins behind him all rose as well. Before the Hufflepuffs could speak, he turned and headed for the door. The other goblins followed closely behind him.

Roland and the other Hufflepuffs rose as well. It was over? How could that be? “Wait!” called out Wizard Smith, “There must be something!” he pleaded but the lead goblin didn’t stop; the door opened; a blast of cold air filled the room. The goblins crowded around the door waiting for their turn to get out.

“Stop!” screeched Holly suddenly. She left Roland’s side and charged into the group of goblins. Roland hastened to follow. Holly took hold of one of the goblins by the shoulder and physically turned him to face her. “What is your name?” she demanded; the other goblins stopped and watched.

“Holly!” questioned Roland. “What are you doing?”

“Your name!” repeated Holly while ignoring Roland. “What is your name?”

The Goblin snarled something guttural and unintelligible.

“How long?” Holly suddenly demanded of the goblin standing next to the one whose shoulder she still held. Roland looked at the nearby goblin and realized with shock it was Gottenram!
“How long has he been this way?” she repeated.
But her attention remained on Gottenram, who stared back at Holly without speaking. “I can fix this!” Holly told him. “Not me,” she amended, “but I can get someone who can! You have to let me help!” she insisted.

“Fix what?” asked Roland.
“The curse!” answered Holly. “I know I can fix this!” she repeated. “You must let me!”
“What curse?” questioned Roland. “What are you talking about?”
“It’s the Confringo Communicado curse!” Holly told him. “I just know it!”

“The Confringo Communicado curse? Are you sure?” The goblin looked fine to him.

“I guess not,” answered Roland uncertainly. “But—”

“You’d like to leave, wouldn’t you?” Holly asked the goblin. He didn’t reply. His glittering black eyes never left Holly’s face. “Don’t like me touching you, either, and you’d like to leave but you can’t!” she told him. “You can’t even move because doing so would tell us what you’re thinking; it would be communicating! We can fix this!” Holly repeated looking at Gottenram. “If you’ll let us,” she added. “Just give me time to find someone to remove it!”

“But I know how to remove it,” Roland blurted. It was what he had been studying all summer.

“You do?”
“Yes, when I heard what Sir had done to you I immediately looked up and learned the counter spell to the Confringo curse in case it ever happened again...” Roland trailed off. He hadn’t really expected to actually use it.

“That’s wonderful!” exclaimed Holly excitedly. “So can you do it now? On him?” Holly insisted. She hadn’t let go of the goblin; it was weird how the goblin hadn’t broken away on his own. Perhaps Holly was right about how leaving would be communicating...”

“I suppose so,” agreed Roland hesitantly. “But I’m not sure it works on goblins...”

“It must!” insisted Holly. “It has to! Sir must not win in this!”

“Sir?” questioned Roland. “You think Sir did this? But there’s nothing in his papers that indicated he cast this spell on a goblin,” he reminded her.

“He never wrote about Gottenram either,” Holly replied. “I think what he did to goblins was beneath recording. When did it happen?” Holly again asked Gottenram.

This time he answered. “Two winters ago on this very day,” he told her.

“Two years ago,” Holly repeated thoughtfully. “It fits. That was after I had escaped the first time; he was probably already making plans to get me again…. You’ve got to help him, please!” she repeated to Roland.

Roland nodded. He cast his mind for the proper spell to counter the curse and aimed his wand. Then he focused on the goblin, twisted his wand in a complicated series of motions and shouted the counter spell. The goblin’s body sort of shuttered and then went still. Had it worked? “Uh, are you O.K.?” questioned Roland hesitantly.

The goblin slowly raised his arms breaking free of Holly’s grasp. He looked at his hands...

“Filthy wand carrier!” he exploded and Roland suddenly felt himself flying across the room stopping only when his back crashed into the wall. The goblin turned and stomped out. Gottenram and the other goblins followed closing the door behind them with a loud clang.

“You O.K.?” asked Holly worriedly while hurrying over to Roland’s side.

“Yeah,” Roland replied as he stood. His head was pounding and his ears rang from the impact against the wall. “So much for gratitude!” he added as he brushed the dirt off his clothes.

“I know what he was feeling,” Holly told him seriously. “You got off lucky.”

“Yeah, well, I feel like a big fool,” he told her. “We could have used that as a bargaining point...”

“No we couldn’t have,” argued Holly fiercely. “No one must profit off of Sir! No one!”

“And no one shall,” affirmed Madam Malkin calmly. She walked over to Roland as she spoke.
“You did the right thing,” she told the two approvingly.

“It’s tempting, I know,” agreed Wizard Fortescue while joining them, “but we cannot benefit from the evil deeds of others for then we are party to them.”

Roland nodded. They were right. They had agreed to erase Sir and all he had done, not profit from it.

“Well, it’s a good thing Holly spotted that goblin or the day would have been a total bust,” added Wizard Smith with resignation.

“Yeah,” agreed Roland. “Or was all this some elaborate plan to get what they wanted all along…” he added suspiciously. “Why they insisted you be here too…” he finished looking back at Holly as he spoke.

“I don’t think so,” said Holly thoughtfully. “At least not all of it. Gottenram might have thought I’d notice something was wrong with that one goblin despite all the other goblins around, but there’s no way he could have known I’d be able to recognize what had happened or do something about it.”

“You’d think that,” agreed Roland aloud but privately, he wasn’t so sure. He’d learned a lot while playing stupid around the Slytherins. The goblins could know a lot more than they ever let on… “Say, do you think you’d have time to visit my new store before going back home?” he asked changing the subject while he headed towards the door.

“You’ve a new store?” Holly asked with surprise. “I thought you were working at Richards’ place.”

“I am,” Roland agreed. “But Crowley let me have a corner to set up a Spell Reversals business, you know, like the one I removed here,” he told her. “There’s a lot of little stuff out there done by witches and wizards who’ve forgotten exactly what wand action to use with the words… I can charge what I like to help them out!” he added proudly. “It’s only space enough for a couple of chairs but I don’t need more. It’s also got a blind wall and door to the outside!”

“A blind wall?” questioned Holly curiously.

“Yeah. Kind of like a one-way window. No one else can see in so there’s privacy for my clients but I can see out should I be needed to serve a customer,” he continued, “or help Crowley should Umbridge show up…” he added mentally. They reached the door. Roland opened it, took a step out and stopped! A huge black creature rose up from the snowy ground and blocked the way!

It was the size of Fang—Hagrid’s dog. But it wasn’t a dog. It looked like some sort of gigantic insect; it had a huge head with waving antennas and long pointy things on either side of its mouth. Six smooth jointed legs, the front two thicker than the others with shiny sharp claws for feet were attached to its long body. The back two legs were thick and bent out like a grasshopper’s except it wasn’t a grasshopper. Roland had never seen anything like it before, not even in books! He drew his wand and aimed it at the creature warily. What spell would work best should it try to attack? Roland decided on “stupify!” It was a simple, but effective spell that didn’t require any fancy wand work…

“What is it?” asked Witch Malkin stepping next to Roland, her wand extended.

“I don’t know,” answered Wizard Fortescue moving next to her, his wand also drawn.

“It’s a cricket,” announced Holly. Of the five, only Holly hadn’t drawn her wand. She drew even with Roland and then took a step closer. “A mole cricket.”

“You certain?” asked Roland dubiously. Crickets were small—not at all like this huge thing.

“I’m certain,” replied Holly and she held up her hand. On the back was a tattooed image of something similar except it had a set of outstretched wings on either side of its body. “Put your wands away,” she told the others as she took another step towards the cricket. “He’s more scared of us than you are of him! Or her,” she amended looking at it thoughtfully. Madam Malkin, Wizard Fortescue and Wizard Smith all put their wands away; Roland kept his out warily; he was acting as security, after all.

“Hi there,” greeted Holly softly. She crouched down and stretched her tattooed hand out to the cricket. It’s long antennae waved back and forth in an inquisitive manner. “What’s your name?”

“I don’t think you should do that!” exclaimed Roland worriedly. “It could hurt you!”

“Not me,” stated Holly in a dreamy voice. “I know it.” She lowered her hand to the head of
the cricket. It lifted its head; the pointy things near its mouth reached out and touched Holly. A horn sounded in the distance, brassy and loud. The cricket skittered away. Then it opened a set of lacy black wings on its back and took off in flight with a loud humming sound. The cricket soared high in the sky and took off in a straight line vanishing from sight.

“Look!” exclaimed Holly with wonder.

Roland looked down from the sky where he had been watching for signs of the cricket’s return. On the snow where the cricket had been was a small pile of—well, they were roundish but more oval than round and light tan in colour with black spots, each about the size of his thumb.

“Eggs?” guessed Madam Malkin.

Holly knelt down and—“Don’t!” exclaimed Roland using his wand to strike her hand away from the pile. “We don’t know what they are or if they’re dangerous!”

“If they’re eggs,” added Wizard Smith, “then you shouldn’t disturb them!”

“And eggs shouldn’t be kept out in the cold and wet like this,” countered Holly again reaching out to pick up an egg, if that’s what it was.

“No!” ordered Roland again pushing Holly’s hand away. “Remember the plaque? You can’t just be picking up things you know nothing about!”

“Someone will be,” she told him. “We can’t just leave something like this out in the open if you’re worried they might be dangerous,” Holly countered. “Look!” she said holding up her tattooed hand. “No compulsion! See!” Holly waved her hand over the pile without the slightest wavering down. “Now, what else do I have to do to make sure it’s safe before touching them?”

Roland gulped. “Uh.” His mind cast about for the right spells that went with dark magic detecting.

“And nothing to hurt them either,” insisted Holly firmly. “They’ve done us no harm…”

So Roland aimed his wand at the eggs and whispered the dark magic revealing spells he knew. Nothing happened. With his free hand he reached out…

“No,” said Holly firmly. “I don’t know anything about spell reversals. If something goes wrong, I’d rather it happen to me than you. That way you can undo it…”

“But what if it’s a portkey,” protested Roland.

“Then I’ll have company!” Holly said firmly as she grabbed Roland’s wrist with her left hand. It felt icy cold. They’d been outside a while and Holly wasn’t wearing gloves. That was probably the reason for the cold hand, hopefully. Holly again reached for an egg while gripping Roland tightly. This time he didn’t try to stop her.

“It’s warm,” Holly reported when she held an egg in her fingertips. She curled her fingers around the egg. “Wonderfully warm!” she said smiling.

Roland stared at Holly’s hand that held the egg. The fine tattoo lines on the back seemed to blur and reform; a number appeared in the head of the cricket. “Four, three, eight,” he said reading the numbers aloud.

“What?” questioned Madam Malkin in an alert sounding voice. “That sounds familiar!” She pulled out a scroll and hastily unrolled it. “I thought so!” she said with excitement. “That’s one of the vault numbers we were trying to get a key for…”

Holly turned her hand over and opened up her fingers. The egg was gone. In its place was a familiar looking golden key—a Gringotts key!

“It’s got to go to vault 438!” Madam Malkin said excitedly.

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Fourteen eggs, fourteen keys. Each time a number appeared on Holly’s hand in the head of the cricket tattoo. The Hufflepuff elders excitedly attached bits of paper to each key with the accompanying number. Roland DeWitt watched the proceedings worriedly.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Holly informed the others, “not at all.”

“It may not hurt but what do you feel?” wondered Roland. He knew Ravindra had tested Holly last year and the tattoo was just supposed to be a tattoo. It wasn’t supposed to be magical at all!
Were they right in letting Holly use her hand this way? Sure it was helping them, but was it also digging Holly deeper into something she could not control? Roland knew nothing about Goblin magic. This bit seemed harmless enough, but was it? Had the goblins turned Holly into some sort of tool?

“They’ll be so happy to get these!” said Wizard Smith excitedly as he wrapped the last key in a bit of parchment labeled “215.”

“What will you tell them?” asked Holly worriedly.

“What do you want us to tell them?” asked Madam Malkin.

“Huh?”

“We agreed to keep all negotiations secret and confidential, but technically, none of what happened today occurred during the negotiations…”

“Well, I really don’t want anyone knowing about me and the goblins and what I can sense,” Holly began thoughtfully. “We can’t really talk about that stuff anyway because it involves Sir. And the stuff out here,” she added waving at the area where the cricket and eggs had been, “I don’t want anyone else to think this tattoo is anything but a tattoo, don’t want them looking at me differently because of it…” Holly looked down at her hand. “Perhaps it only works with cricket eggs or Gringott keys…” she added hopefully. Her voice died as she looked thoughtfully at her tattoo. “Can everything that happened today, all of it, be kept secret? Like it was all part of the negotiations?” she asked looking back at Madam Malkin.

“Of course, dear, if you want it that way,” she replied with a smile.

“Then that’s the way I want it.” The other Hufflepuffs smiled and nodded in agreement.

Roland didn’t. The thing with her hand had to be reported… “I’m still telling Winonan!” stated Roland firmly.

Holly frowned. “Fiona and no one else!” she finally conceded.

“Huh? Fiona? Why Fiona?” Fiona was a portrait in Healer Winonan’s office. She liked to be involved even though she was only a portrait and had taken notes when he had gotten splinched a while ago. “Agreed,” said Roland aloud. Telling her was pretty much like telling Winonan anyway—she’d be sure to pass it on…

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Chapter 29

Dear Headmistress McGonagall,

I am writing to inform you that Reagan and Riley Shipman will not be returning to Hogwarts in January.

Sincerely,

Edgar and Katherine Shipman.

“That’s another letter,” said Headmistress McGonagall to no one in particular. “How many does that make?”

“Too many,” answered the Albus Dumbledore portrait gloomily.

“Any more and the staff at Hogwarts will have no one to teach again…” stated Dily worriedly.

“And a new reason for the kidnappings,” added Severus dryly.

“What should we do?”

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“Thank you so much for your time,” finished McGonagall. “And now, I would like to introduce one more person who would like to speak on this subject, my Assistant, Mr. Anthony Richards…”

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Headmistress McGonagall had called a meeting of the Hogwarts Governors the previous week to discuss the rather drastic drop in enrollment expected in the spring term. Harry Potter had been appalled at the large number of students not returning, but not surprised. It had taken every ounce of willpower to not write a similar letter.

The kidnapper(s) had not yet been identified. Worse, no one knew how it had been done. Despite all the added security Dean promised to put into place, there was no real guarantee that what had happened in the fall would not again happen in the spring. The thought of putting Albus and Lily on a train that might ride off never to be seen again was unbearable! What responsible parent would knowingly place their children at that kind of risk? On the other hand, if closing Hogwarts was the kidnapper’s goal all along, how could they not go? If only attendance could be done without the train. Unfortunately, there was no other way to transport so many students to Hogsmeade at once. Fortunately, Harry had thought of a way to offset that dilemma…

He offered to ride along with the students… As a Hogwarts Governor, Harry’s presence demonstrated the school confidence in Dean’s security measures to insure student safety… It also insured Harry would be there should the train and its passengers again slip from sight. The rest of the Governors, mostly parents and grandparents quickly volunteered to do the same. None of them wanted to leave their children alone and vulnerable should there be another kidnap attempt.

And so the campaign to Save Hogwarts began. Rita, always looking for ways to sell papers, readily helped out. The “Reason for the Kidnapping Revealed!” and “Hogwarts to shut down!” headlines sparked all sorts of debates about the merits of Hogwarts and the consequences of shutting it down. “Parents Afraid!” and “Don’t let the Kidnappers win!” headlines triggered even more discussion as parents weighed the caution and fear over long-range consequences both personal and public. For some, returning to Hogwarts became almost a patriotic duty. Others were still unwilling
Anthony Richards stood amidst applause and looked nervously around the room. They were in the Leaky Cauldron, magically enhanced with an extension spell; the place was filled with witches and wizards, parents and students all concerned with the prospect of returning to Hogwarts. It was his first public appearance where he was expected to do more than smile and bow.

“This is a great honour,” whispered Paige. “Yours is a voice of the students, those who have been to H2. It says much if you are willing to take the risk of returning.”

“To what advantage?” argued Anthony. “If I go back on that train and it takes us to Hogwarts, I’ll be a nobody! The title was a glorified paper pushing job that I made into more because there was no headmistress!”

“So? You showed great initiative; you saw an opportunity and took it! There will be other opportunities and you will take advantage of them as well,” Paige assured confidently. “And if my words lead them all back to H2? What then?” questioned Anthony. “I’ll not only be a nobody, but I’ll be the one who led everyone back into doom!”

“No,” Paige corrected. “You were merely the Headmistress’ Assistant doing as instructed. The blame would lie with her should the train return to H2. And as Headmistress’ Assistant you would lead again in H2.”

“No, I’d still be a nobody!” replied Anthony bluntly. “Who will look to me for anything with all the parents, aurors and governors coming along to choose between?”

“You miss the larger picture,” Paige told Anthony. “The risks are great,” she acknowledged, “but if you succeed, then McGonagall and the Hogwarts Governors will be indebted to you; you! It matters not if you do anything else for McGonagall the rest of the year as Assistant. You will still be the one to have kept Hogwarts going…”

“And what should I say?” Anthony asked uncertainly.

“Keep it simple, sincere and convincing,” she replied. “Lie if you must,” she advised. “Wycliff won’t be there to claim otherwise. But remember, you are there to save Hogwarts not remove McGonagall…”

Anthony looked at the faces in front of him. He recognized the students standing between adults, presumably their parents. Their faces reminded him of the faces of the frightened firsts that first night. He could tell the practice runs of the Express that had occurred without incident, the security measures proposed by Thomas, the knowledge the Governors would ride along or that parents could come too, had not been sufficient to change minds. What could he say that was more persuasive? He had to say something…

“A lot of things happened while we were at H2,” he began hesitantly. “Some of them good, others, not so…” he broke off not wanting to remember. “But in all of that we managed to stay
together by reminding ourselves that “We must not let the kidnappers win in this.” Anthony paused. That was Wycliff’s big fear but it had resonated with the other students as well.

“You’re all scared,” he told them. He sensed a stiffening within the crowd; he remembered; no one wants to be called “scared.” “I’m scared, too,” he acknowledged. And he knew they were again listening. In this case he was one of them, sharing the same uncertainties from the inside, as one who had been missing. “But I don’t think that fear will go away by not returning to Hogwarts,” he added aloud. It was a question he had asked himself every day once McGonagall had suggested he assist in getting students to return to Hogwarts, never bothering to ask if he intended to return… “It’ll eat away at your insides and you’ll always wonder if you did the right thing, but at what cost?” That was a Gryffindor kind of statement, but Anthony could already feel the truth of it as he weighed certainty against the unknown, fear against the rewards of success should this work…

“If the ultimate destruction of Hogwarts is the goal of the kidnappers, then I say we must not let the kidnappers win in this…”

“And if we again end up in H2?” stated a fearful voice. Anthony recognized it as one of the Firsts, Wanda Woodbead. Anthony searched for an answer; it was a question all too real to himself and those who had been there. Then something Fitzpatrick had said drifted to mind… “Hope for the best; plan for the worst!” Then we come prepared,” Anthony said with determination.

“Breysburry,” he stated picking her face out of the crowd. “Bring bees this time,” he told her, “a whole hive of them! And seeds!” he added to the group as a whole. “Seeds to everything and anything! Grain, Fruit, Vegetables! The works!”

“Potions!” chimed in a voice from the crowd. Anthony recognized its owner as Head Girl Jennifer Woods. “A full set of healing potions!”

“And potion supplies so we can make more! Lots of supplies” added Nikita Kakkar, their potions instructor.

“A Quidditch set!”
“A healer’s book!”
“Brooms!”
“Shovels!”
“Candy!”

“What would you bring?” someone asked Anthony.

The room grew silent. Anthony looked around at the crowd as he thought. What would he bring? Spell books with curses and hexes for sure. Extra wands? Definitely. And several House elves to do the cooking and cleaning! Then Anthony saw McGonagall out of the corner of his eye and remembered why he was there. He took a deep breath. “I’d bring along a very large extendable bag to keep everything I didn’t need while attending class at Hogwarts.” Anthony told the group seriously. Everyone laughed, even Anthony.

McGonagall stood. “Excellent advice, Mr. Richards,” she said warmly. “One I hope every student takes. We will be having class in January and I expect each and every one of you to be there…”

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“Thank you for coming today,” began Headmistress McGonagall. “Would you like some tea?”

“That’s not necessary,” answered Harry Potter who was seated across from her. “How are things going?”

“Rather well, I think,” said McGonagall in answer. “Richards was very effective at that Leaky Cauldron meeting. I’ve received several notes from parents reversing earlier letters… “That Hufflepuff vote makes a big difference, too,” she added. Harry nodded. The Daily Prophet had splashed a huge headline the previous day about the Hufflepuff meeting and voting to all go to Hogwarts.

“The Hufflepuffs challenged the other houses to do the same,” McGonagall told Harry
referencing the write-up that went with the headlines “Hufflepuffs Dare Houses!” which had appeared prominently just that morning in the Prophet. “I think the Gryffindors and the Slytherin students are all pretty much coming because of it,” she added. “At least several of them have openly committed to going. I got the impression the Gryffindors didn’t want the Hufflepuffs to look braver than them and the Slytherins won’t want anyone to think they can’t do something a Hufflepuff can do. The Ravenclaws?” she finished thoughtfully. “You never can tell with them but I think they’ll weigh the merits of both sides and let their children come too, accompanied by parents certain they can be of use should something go amiss… I just wish we knew how it was done… We’d all feel better if we knew how to prevent it from happening again…”

Harry nodded his agreement. Dean was filling the train with aurors and planned an escort to fly along outside as well, but without knowing exactly what to expect, there was a good chance the train would vanish as completely as before and they’d be powerless to stop it. That’s why Harry intended to be inside not outside should the worst happen. “Why did you ask me here?” he questioned.

“Did Miss Wycliff tell you about the Hufflepuff meeting?” McGonagall asked instead while looking curiously at Harry.

“Um, no,” Harry admitted. The meeting had gone on long after 2:00am; Holly had insisted on returning directly home rather than spend the night at the mansion.

“Well, it turns out that Rita might have exaggerated a bit in her reporting…."

“Oh?”

“Yes. The Hufflepuffs privately sent me word that their vote to return came with conditions…”

“Oh?”

“Yes. It’s a rather unusual condition, one also voiced by several Muggle parents to our representatives when we checked with them about students returning to Hogwarts…”

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“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Averdall,” said Daniel Pilkington pleasantly to the stout man wearing thick glasses and lady with sandy coloured hair. Daniel was wearing his very best “Muggle” outfit, a royal blue pinstripe double-breasted tuxedo suit with a pink vest, gray spats and light blue bow tie. It was the kind of thing he wore when he went outside Diagon Alley for a stroll. “Mason,” Daniel added acknowledging the young boy standing with them. “Won’t you all come in? We’re so glad you could make it.” The Averdalls stepped inside. “There’s food on the back table,” Daniel told them while he carefully closed the door behind them. They were the last of the guests expected.

“Help yourself and find a seat.”

This was a very special meeting—never before attempted—the kind of challenge Daniel liked best. Daniel had found a vacant warehouse in the middle of Muggle territory and refurbished it for the occasion—cleaned, furnished and decorated. Several glass chandeliers were placed overhead; their lit candles twinkled cheerfully. Mr. Potter contributed the refreshments, a rather boring assortment of biscuits that didn’t move, wheeze or puff when you bit into them. They came in crinkly clear pre-wrapped packaging. There was tea, too, and juice, also in smooth clear flexible containers. All of it was designed to minimize their differences.

Stan and Rupert had been kept busy transporting all the guests for this evening and were standing by to return everyone afterwards.

When Daniel had judged everyone had had sufficient time to get some food, mingle and select a seat, he walked to the table in the front of the room. “If I could have everyone’s attention,” he began, “It’s time to begin. My name is Daniel Pilkington,” he continued making introductions. “My daughter, Leila, was at H2,” he added making the connection they all understood. They were all parents with children who had been trapped at H2. “This is Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts,” he continued indicating the tall stern looking lady with wire-rimmed glasses who sat at the table. McGonagall’s long gray hair was done in a tight bun and she wore her formal tartan plaid
gown. “Mr. Anthony Richards, the Headmistress’ Assistant at Hogwarts,” Daniel continued while indicating the person who sat next to McGonagall.

Everyone looked with interest at Anthony—He was fairly slender and young, sixteen—not yet an adult by wizard standards. Anthony’s shoulder length sandy brown hair was neatly tied back into a ponytail. Today he looked distinctly uncomfortable in that purple suit with an emerald green vest and gold coloured bow tie. Daniel knew Anthony would have felt more comfortable in proper wizard robes, but it wasn’t that kind of meeting. “And besides him is Hogwarts’ Governor Mr. Harry Potter.” Mr. Potter wore a nondescript gray suit, slightly wrinkled. It was probably the same suit Daniel had seen Mr. Potter wear every time he visited with Holly Wycliff. Of the three, Harry Potter probably knew best how to blend in with Muggles though Daniel had heard the Headmistress had been more involved with Muggles in her younger years.

There was a fourth person of significance in the room, one Daniel did not introduce or even mention. He sat quietly in a chair against the wall near a table labeled “Beer & Cider.” His head was bent and he looked intently down at some sort of hinged flat gray board on his lap. Even though the person was in plain sight, Daniel was fairly certain neither McGonagall nor Anthony had seen him, probably none of the students, either. But Daniel observed several Muggle parents approach the Beer table to get a glass of something to drink and use the opportunity to speak to the person near the table: Vernon Wycliff.

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“What do you make of this?” questioned Mr. Potter and he handed a folded flat piece of paper to Daniel.

Daniel took the paper and opened it up. There was a folded note inside. Daniel opened the note and scanned the contents. “Why Vernon?” he questioned.

“Vernon?” repeated Mr. Potter. “You sure it says Vernon?”

“Yes, of course,” stated Daniel positively. “It says so right there.”

“McGonagall thought the letter referred to Holly.”

“Seriously?” questioned Daniel in disbelief. “The letter clearly states they wish to meet both you and your cousin Vernon before making a decision about returning to Hogwarts…”

“I agree,” replied Mr. Potter. “And I was about to correct McGonagall when it suddenly occurred to me there was a reason why she insisted the family wanted to meet with me and my cousin Holly, not Vernon…”

“You mean?”

“Yeah, he’s still unplottable… And I need your help in figuring out a way to hold this meeting without breaking that spell…”

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Holly Wycliff was there also. She had chosen a seat in the front row. She didn’t want the extra attention so Daniel did not point her out but the students probably would. Physically, Holly looked fine. Mentally? Well, Daniel hadn’t had the opportunity to talk with Holly since the ball when she had been the guest of honour... Leila reported Holly was “wicked good” as an Empath, able to pick out the lone sick or distressed emotion within the crowd. She also mentioned something about how the Hufflepuffs kept a tight watch on Holly after her collapse, one that never let up. There had to be some reason for it and nothing good. Daniel openly worried about the advisability of letting Holly return with the others. Mr. Potter nodded. Then he had said softly, “She says she wants to go; her parents wouldn’t agree unless she took Winky with her; Winky has orders to keep Holly safe…”

“Headmistress McGonagall would like to share a few words with you,” finished Daniel, “so if
you will all kindly give her your attention…” Daniel sat down in the empty chair at the table as McGonagall rose amidst a polite round of applause. Then the room grew silent.

McGonagall cleared her throat. “Hogwarts will be beginning its spring term soon,” she began. “I’m here to request you send your children to continue their education…” McGonagall laid out the logic of returning and the basic precautions being taken to insure H2 would not happen again. The group listened politely without comment. It was not news; this had all been explained the individual families before.

When she had finished, Mr. Averdall raised his hand. “You have children attending Hogwarts?” he asked bluntly.

“No.”

“Then I want to hear from someone who does… Mr. Potter? You sending your children back?” All heads turned to Harry Potter. McGonagall sat down.

Odd how almost every Muggle parent had requested to meet and talk with Harry Potter about this… That nasty business with Lord Voldemort had been nearly 30 years ago! While Mr. Potter was still a hero in the wizard world surely none of the Muggles knew about that… Why would they look to him for answers?

Mr. Potter took out a handkerchief, removed his glasses and cleaned them carefully. Then he placed them back over his nose, readjusted their position and looked out over the crowd of families. He was clearly stalling for time. It was a difficult question, one Daniel had agonized over with his own family long and hard before deciding upon an answer. “Yes,” said Mr. Potter firmly in a loud clear voice.

“Why?” asked another parent quickly. “And don’t give me that #$@$ about saving Hogwarts. You’ve probably enough income out there to postpone things for a year or two without any difficulty. Why the rush? Why insist on returning as if nothing happened? Before you’ve even found the kidnappers?” Another good question. One Daniel hoped Mr. Potter would be able to explain as well.

Mr. Potter stood. “Fear!” he began aloud in a steady voice. “Of the known and unknown. We face it every day,” he told the group. “Every time you step off the curb into the street you know that it’s possible for some crazed motorist to whip around the corner and strike you. And so you must make a decision—Do you remain safe on the curb or take a chance and go about your daily affairs as if nothing bad will happen? Of course, you’d never step off the curb without looking both ways first, but no matter how many precautions you take, the chance of something terrible happening still remains.

We can postpone the reopening of Hogwarts until a later date, say, when the kidnappers have been found, but when will that be? A month? Two months? A year? Two years? More? They haven’t found the kidnappers yet; they may never find the guilty persons. At some point we will again have to ask ourselves, “should I step off that curb or accept that my new life will forever be attached to the sidewalk?”

Mr. Potter waited a moment before continuing. “My children have decided to face their fears and not let the kidnappers rule their actions; they intend to go back to school as usual. I am honoring their decision.” Then he added, “I am also taking the Express with them.” There was an unintelligible murmur within the group. “I know that is not an option open to you but I swear that if that Express rolls into H2 again, I will do everything within my power to keep your children safe and get them home.”

“And if it makes it to Hogwarts?” questioned another parent.

“Then I will be on the Express with them going back to London,” assured Mr. Potter. “And on every Express afterwards until we can guarantee H2 won’t happen again.”

Harry Potter didn’t speak out much in the wizard community, but when he did, everyone knew he was as good as his word. Would it be the same for Muggles?

Anthony Richards stood. Anthony had made no secret of his dislike of Muggles, of anything non-Slytherin for that matter, yet here he was in front of a group of Muggles trying to secure their cooperation…
“One of the things we all wished for while at H2,” Anthony began in a solemn voice, “was a way to let our families know how we were…” No sneer, no disdain, total sincerity. He had obviously been coached well, Paige’s doing, no doubt. Of course Anthony would know to keep his words totally honest with Holly sitting in the audience.

Leila reported that while the Hufflepuffs watched Holly, Holly watched Anthony. It possibly had something to do with the “promise” Anthony had made that had gotten Holly up off the floor that first week or not… Leila hadn’t heard the actual terms of the promise; no one had expected Richards to succeed in his efforts to revive Holly. Holly’s abrupt motion had taken everyone by surprise—and she had looked positively crazed holding that wand (her first one, not the eucalyptus one,) on him. (making three in Holly’s possession by Daniel’s count. Had she more?) Daniel had combed all the reports made about H2; not a single one mentioned that promise or the wand she used that night. Their deliberate omission was a clearly an attempt to protect someone and Daniel doubted it was Anthony…

“This is something that can help,” finished Anthony. He lifted a basket in front of him from off the table and held it out to the group. “These are called Healthstones,” he told them. Anthony dipped his free hand into the basket and pulled out a handful of chains each attached to a shimmering silver pendant. “We’d like each family to take one. It only takes a drop of blood to activate and then you’ll know the health of your loved one even if we are in H2. It doesn’t matter if you decide to send your child back to Hogwarts or not,” he added walking over to the first row of Muggles with the basket. “No family deserves the uncertainty you went through during the fall.” Anthony handed the basket to the Muggle man as he spoke.

“What about you?” called out a third parent. “Are you going on the train?” Everyone seemed to lean forward.

Anthony paused and looked over the group. “I need to finish my education, he told the group firmly. “And Hogwarts is the best place in Great Britain to make that happen…”

“Interesting!” thought Daniel, “and well done.” Anthony managed a perfect delivery: absolute sincerity, saying what a Headmistress’ Assistant was expected to say obviously supporting a return to the school. Even so, Daniel noted Anthony hadn’t actually personally committed to that return. That meant the answer was either “no!” or undecided.” It also meant that despite his outward appearance, Anthony was as conflicted about this venture as the rest of them.

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“I can’t get on that train, not with Wycliff coming!” whispered Anthony Richards desperately to the portrait of Severus Snape. “She’ll expect me to keep that damned promise.” It was the day before the Express would return to Hogwarts, or wherever. Anthony had told Paige he wanted some time alone in her potions room. Paige, probably guessing what Anthony really wanted to do, had agreed. “And how am I supposed to do that?” Anthony asked. “I haven’t the poison any more and Paige watches me like a hawk so there’s no way I can get the ingredients to make more!”

“That presumes the train will arrive at H2 not Hogwarts.”

“Oh, it will!” assured Anthony fervently. “The kidnappers are just waiting until the train is loaded with witches and wizards and then they’ll going to take us all! And there won’t be any Nellie to lead us back! The students will be gone! The Ministry will be discredited and Hogwarts will be no more!” The kidnappers will step into the vacuum and take over! We’d all be better to keep off that train!”

“But I believe you’ve been telling everyone that the Express will arrive at Hogwarts on schedule.”

“I lied!” admitted Anthony. “I said what was necessary to support Hogwarts; that was my job as Headmistress' Assistant! But I know better! The very thought of getting on that train makes my legs go weak and stomach churn! Do you know how close I came to not getting back last time?” Anthony continued. “I was about the board and the door closed in my face! If Corner hadn’t Apparated me inside I’d be there still! Or in a nowhere stasis like that snack lady… I won’t risk that
again!” Anthony told the portrait. “I just won’t!”

“Then you have created a dilemma,” said the portrait dryly. “Either you take the train and risk H2 or stay behind and face political ruin.”

“Ruin? No, not ruin,” argued Anthony. “I’ll be free to look for the kidnappers from the outside,” he told the portrait. “And I’ll find them! I know how they think!”

“That train will leave with or without you,” informed the portrait with a sneer. “There will be students on that train, students who believed you, in what you said and acted on your words. If you remain behind and the train returns to H2, then some may applaud your wisdom. But most will say that you had advance knowledge of what would happen and deliberately failed to share it, that you knowingly sent them to their doom…”

“I would nev—”

“If the train arrives successfully at Hogsmeade,” continued the portrait over Anthony’s words, “then it will be Corner, or one of the prefects, or Potter,” he shuttered and sneered as he said the name, “or Fitzpatrick who will get the credit of returning the students to Hogwarts. That credit rightfully belongs to you! You have worked hard for it, more so as you didn’t believe a word of what you said. Will you let them take it away?”

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“You’ll be there with me, won’t you?” Holly Wycliff whispered anxiously. “I don’t think I could bear being there without you!” It was the night before the Express would take off to Hogwarts, or wherever. Holly was locked in her bedroom talking to a portrait her parents didn’t know she had.

“I’ll be there,” assured the portrait of Headmaster Snape. “If it’s possible.”

“Oh, it must be possible!” exclaimed Holly. “You made it last time and everything was ever so much better afterwards!”

The Headmaster rolled his eyes. “You managed quite well without me,” he reminded Holly.

“But better with you!” Holly assured. “Ever so much better! You will be there won’t you?” she begged again. “I don’t think I could bear being there without you!”

“I will remain in your frame until we get to Hogwarts,” the Headmaster promised stiffly. “At which point I shall inform the other portraits there was no need for concern…”

“Thank you!”

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Chapter 30

Kings Cross Station looked much fuller than the last time he’d seen it. Not that he was really looking at the time. It was only much later that Anthony Richards realized the Muggles had been somehow cleared out and only witches and wizards were there to witness their hasty arrival. How had they known? Anthony asked later but did not receive a satisfactory answer.

Anthony gulped nervously as he looked about the station. Was he really considering going back?

“You’ll be fine!” assured Paige confidently as if sensing his indecision.

“Yeah,” muttered Anthony as he walked up to the platform. No heavy luggage this time, just what he could carry in the extendable bag slung over his shoulder. “That’s why you’re coming along…” Tom and his parents had come along to see him off but they’d be returning home afterwards. Tom had a store to take care of. DeWitt had taken leave choosing to ride on the Express with the Hufflepuff students. Anthony’s parents wanted to come along too but Anthony talked them out of it—Sheeze, he was sixteen already! As much as he would have liked them to come, it would have been so embarrassing having them along! Unfortunately, he hadn’t been able to talk Paige out of riding with the other parents on the Express. At first, Anthony thought it was because she was good with potions and they could use someone like that should they end up at H2. Then he decided she was actually there to make sure he didn’t get a hold of anything toxic…

“I’m coming along to make sure Turay joins the group,” Paige informed Anthony. “Has Thackeray and Turay gone through?” she questioned the Ministry Official leaning casually behind Platform 9 and ¾, alert to the Muggle who might notice the excessive Wizard departures…

“Turay, yes,” he answered, “not Thackeray.”

“Interesting,” murmured Paige thoughtfully.

“Ready, Assistant Richards?” asked Tom proudly.

“I guess,” answered Tom reluctantly. Taking a deep breath, the family stepped through to the other side.

Platform 9 and ¾ was packed with people! Witches and Wizards large and small, those he knew and those he didn’t lined the rails. “Why Turay?” Anthony questioned Paige.

“I promised Thackeray if Turay wasn’t on the Express I’d turn the two of them into Child Services,” murmured Paige. “If she doesn’t get on the Express or stay there, then I won’t either. Excuse me,” she added scanning the crowds. “I’ve got to find her….” Paige swiftly stepped away leaving Anthony with his family.

Anthony looked around too, seeking familiar faces…

“I’m relieving you of your promise,” came a voice at his side.

“Huh?” Anthony turned and found Wycliff standing next to him. Her blonde hair hung straight except for the single beaded braid on one side. A flower hairclip, a spray of green-petaled flowers with a shiny blue/black berry at the center of each blossom, kept the hair back on the other side.

“I’m relieving you of your promise,” she repeated. “You don’t have to, you know, do things, if, uh, we end up back in H2…”

“That’s nice of you,” stated Anthony dryly as if Wycliff’s promise had never weighed on his mind. “What are you doing here anyway?” he asked. “I figured that Hufflepuff vote was all media hype; there was no way they’d ever let you come back…”

“Couldn’t stop me,” she answered bluntly. “There’s strength in numbers,” she reminded him, “and I figure there’ll be more Hufflepuffs on than off the train….”

“Oh.” That was true enough. Anthony had heard the officials had added several cars to the Express to accommodate all the extra witches and wizards intending to come along…

“See you later,” Wycliff said cheerfully and stepped away.

“Hold it!” called out Anthony.
She stopped. “What?”
“Hand it over!” he demanded while holding out his hand to her.
“What?”
“The poisons!” he explained.
“What?”
“You’ve no promise to fall back on,” he reminded her. “There’s no way you’d be on that train without a supply of something… Now hand it over!”
“T’isn’t any of your business!”
“It is if we end up in H2,” retorted Anthony. “Now, hand it over or I’ll tell Woods what you’re carrying!”
Wycliff slowly reached into her pocket and pulled out a tiny container and placed it into Anthony’s hand. It was not glass, (too light,) amber coloured and clear with what appeared to be tiny round white things inside…
“What’s this?” he asked curiously.
“Digitalis, nitroglycerin,” answered Wycliff vaguely as if those words actually meant something. They had to be lethal given the dreamy look on Wycliff’s face. She turned.
“Hold it,” commanded Anthony.
“What?” she asked innocently as she stared at the hand Anthony again held out expectantly.
“The rest!” he ordered.
“There isn’t any more.”
“You have three wands,” Anthony reminded Wycliff. “Of course there’s more!”
Wycliff slowly knelt down and lifted up a pants leg… She handed Anthony another small container. This one held something oval, half-white, half-yellow in colour.
“What’s this?”
“Cyanide,” she answered as if he should know what that meant. “You will keep it safe for me won’t you?”
“Where’d you get this?” he asked dodging her question.
“Amazing what you can find on the web… I’ve got directions, too, but it takes a lot of pits…” Anthony gulped feeling slightly nauseated. Wycliff was just as worried as he was about returning to H2, but she had taken action—”You shouldn’t have agreed to go,” he told her.
“Had to,” she answered. “The others wanted it so bad; they needed to return, to face their fears—and they wouldn’t go without me… You will keep them safe for me won’t you?” she begged fixing her emerald green eyes on his.
“Why don’t we talk about that later,” Anthony suggested tucking both bottles in his pocket.
Like never.
“At H2,” she promised and stepped away.
“Oh, good! You’ve got your purple robes on!” stated Scorpius. “Come on! They’re waiting!”
“Waiting?” questioned Anthony as he followed Scorpius through the crowds.
“Yes, Rita! She wants a photo before everyone gets on!”
“More likely a last photo before we all vanish into nowhere!” growled Fitzpatrick joining Anthony and Scorpius and matching their pace.
“You don’t have to come along,” reminded Anthony as they walked.
“And miss watching you eat your words about returning to Hogwarts? No way!”
“Actually, Rita’s stalling,” stated Pilkington joining the group. “No one wants to get on now that we’re here…”
“The Firsts said they’ll get on only if you do,” added Wycliff also joining. “And I’m not leaving your side!” Anthony rolled his eyes. Had she done it to him again?
“Smile!” came the syrupy voice of Rita Skeeter. Anthony automatically stopped in a pose-able position and smiled. Light bulbs flashed all around. It would be a good photo. “There they are,” intoned Rita. “Bravely facing their fears all to save Hogwarts! One has to wonder if any school is worth such bravery…”
Anthony could almost hear the tears drip from her eyes. “Yeah, right,” he thought, “you’re
not going on the train…” Rita would be waiting at Hogsmeade… He turned his eyes to the Express, steam puffing out in all the right places waiting…

“Half a league, half a league, half a league onward…” muttered Fitzpatrick within hearing.

“Seriously?” stated Pilkington with an exasperated sigh. “Can’t you think of something else?”

“Not really!”

“What? What is it?”

“Charge of the Light Brigade,” intoned Wycliff informatively.

“Charge?” questioned Scorpius. “That sounds promising…”

“Into the Valley of Death rode the 600,” continued Fitzpatrick.

“Oh.” Anthony gulped.

“Tisn’t a valley,” Wycliff pointed out. “Or 600…”

“Could be with all the extras…” pointed out Pilkington.

“Not everyone’s getting on,” reminded Scorpius.

“Tisn’t a Valley of Death either, no matter what happens,” Anthony assured himself aloud knowing the conversation was meaningless, merely one more stall tactic. “Did they all die in your charge?” he asked.

“Mostly,” answered Fitzpatrick. “But they got a cool poem written about them afterwards.”

“Just what I always wanted!” said Anthony dryly. “Shall we get this over with?” he asked looking about at the faces near. They nodded, but still they waited.

“Well?” asked Anthony expectantly.

“You’re the Assistant harping about saving Hogwarts,” reminded Fitzpatrick with a half smile on his lips. “Gonna have to lead by example.”

Anthony sighed and mentally rolled his eyes. He took a deep breath and then a step towards the Express. Pilkington, Scorpius, Wycliff and Fitzpatrick followed. Anthony took another, and another, quickly before his legs gave out.

“Charge!” he heard Fitzpatrick say in a low cheerful sounding voice next to him.

There were the stairs and then Anthony was on the Express, his heart pounding so loudly he could hear nothing else. Dimly he was aware of the crowds of other witches and wizards getting on as well. Anthony clung to the handrail remembering the last time he had been there, unable to move further onto the Express. The sounds around him grew louder.

Then the Express started to move, slowly at first, then faster. They were off! Anthony gulped and swallowed several times to keep from vomiting.

“We took a vote,” whispered a new voice in his ear. Anthony started at the sound, looked and saw Corner next to him, blocking his exit off the stairs.

“Oh?” Anthony managed to say. “Who?”

“The prefects!” Corner told him. “If this train takes us to H2, you’re going to be in charge whether you like it or not!”

Anthony gulped. “Is that a vote of confidence?” he asked cautiously.

“Nope! Just didn’t want to train someone new…” The words were harsh, but there was none of the open hatred of the fall and a gleam in his eyes seemed to almost twinkle.

Anthony straightened. “In that case, I’m holding a prefect meeting in 10, no 15 minutes in the usual place. I want the Advisors there too!” Anthony added knowing Wycliff would insist on coming along… “And Potter! Pass the word!”

“Yes, sir,” said Corner crisply adding a smart salute. He waved his wand and vanished with a “crack.”

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“I want a complete headcount,” began Anthony when they were all crammed in the prefect berth. “Names and why they are coming. Everyone!” It was a tall order—nearly everyone from the wizard community who could had decided to ride along!

“Why?” protested Gruffudd. (S) “We’re going to Hogwarts aren’t we?”
“Hope for the best, plan for the worst!” Anthony told Gruffudd. Fitzpatrick, O’Daniels and Finnegan (all Gyrffindors) nodded their heads in agreement. “And if we make it to Hogsmeade, well and good,” Anthony continued. “If not, we’ll have a limited amount of time to get things done…” Anthony remembered all the things he wished he had thought to do the first time, had he known. “This is a perfect opportunity for the kidnapper to tag along as one of the family, so it might be a good idea to know who we have…” mused Corner approvingly.

“And an inventory!” continued Anthony. “If this train goes to H2, what can we salvage quickly and take with us?”

“Evacuation to H2 might be a problem,” said Moore thoughtfully (R6) “There’s more people…”

“Don’t forget the house elves!” Wycliff added.

“More house elves! Yes!” thought Anthony. They can take care of the cooking and cleaning!!!

“Actually, it might not be so hard,” put in Woods. “All the Hufflepuffs are bringing brooms…”

“So have the Gyrffindors,” informed Finnegan.

“Check for brooms when you’re doing the head count,” instructed Anthony. “See who will need an alternate form of transportation if it comes to that… I think we can assume all the adults can Apparate…”

“Except they won’t know where they are going,” put in Corner thoughtfully. “You have to envision your destination to Apparate properly.”

“Hmmm, think you can come up with a way around that?”

“Perhaps,” mused Corner.

“Then do it! We need to be ready to go at a moment’s notice, all of us, if it comes to that.”

“What am I doing here?” questioned Potter suddenly.

Anthony turned and looked at Potter, really looked at him. Green eyes like Wycliff, earnest face and tousled black hair resembling his father. “You really see Thestrals?” Anthony questioned. Paige had settled the matter officially a few years ago, but that didn’t mean everyone agreed.


“Then I want you off the train first!”

“Huh?”

“I want you checking out the carriages as they come in for Thestrals. It’s at the station where we shall know for sure whether we are headed for Hogwarts or H2,” he told the group.

It was much later that Anthony had heard the Potter clan had arrived with wands out, ready for trouble. Then he learned the reason: Potter hadn’t seen Thestrals at the station… It took longer to realize the significance of the information… Discrete questioning had revealed that if Potter could see Thestrals, then he was the only student who could do so… No doubt there were adults on the train who could see Thestrals, but Anthony didn’t know who they were, couldn’t order them and he wasn’t sure he’d trust what they’d say… Potter knew what was at stake; he’d never lie, not about this.

“I figure the first sign that we were going to H2 last time was the absence of Thestrals,” Anthony continued. “Nellie obviously hasn’t seen Thestrals so she couldn’t make them pull the carriages. Perhaps she can recreate the people waiting for us at Hogsmeade; they are people she may know, but she can’t do Thestrals. Potter, we need to know immediately if you see or don’t see Thestrals; from that point we will have only minutes to salvage and evacuate the train.” Potter nodded his head. His eyes shone with pride at the responsibility.

“Why evacuate?” questioned Basu. “The train provides shelter; we have food and seeds for more…”

“Perhaps we can get the train to take us back if we stay on it,” argued Wrenzski. (H6)

“Except that’s not what happened last time,” reminded O’Daniels. (G6) “The Snack Cart lady doesn’t remember a thing from the time we pulled into the station to the time we were all returning. She doesn’t know where she was all that time… We could end up like that too!”
“What if there’s no H2 to go to?” asked Huckaby (H6) worriedly.

Anthony gulped. That was a scary thought. All that work they had done… They’d have to start over, or worse! “Let’s face that once we know for sure we’re not at Hogwarts,” Anthony answered aloud. “In the meantime, Woods, you’re in charge of the head and broom count.” Anthony looked to her for confirmation; she nodded in agreement. “And Corner, why don’t you help her and handle the salvage inventory at the same time? Draft whomever you need to help.” His nod of agreement came, but less quickly. “And let’s all meet back in, three hours?” Everyone nodded.

Anthony stood ending the meeting. Everyone filed out of the berth.

“She is a walking bad omen!” muttered Basu in a low voice to Anthony as they left the berth. “You would be wise to keep your distance,” she advised.


“Wycliff!” she spat. “Didn’t you see what she’s wearing in her hair?”

“Huh? Those green and black flowers? What’s wrong with them?”

“Nightshade!” Basu said as if that answered everything.

“Uh, poisonous?” guessed Anthony remembering having read something about it in Basu’s potion book. He had no idea how the plant looked in real life though…

“Very! And she wears it as an ornament!” Basu said disapprovingly.

Anthony sighed. He should have realized Wycliff was carrying more than two lethal items… She probably had a dagger secreted someplace too! “Um, do you think the kidnapper would recognize it too?” he asked curiously.


“Then we’ve one more weapon should we need it,” Anthony concluded aloud.

“Maybe…” agreed Basu speculatively. “Do you suppose she knows what she is wearing?”

“What do you think,” hedged Anthony certain Wycliff knew exactly what she was wearing.

“After all, Wycliff is only a Hufflepuff, but she has had some prior experience with kidnappers…”

“True…”

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“It’s almost time,” announced Corner entering the berth. With him was Albus Potter, Wycliff, and her house elf clinging to her leg.

Anthony Richards nodded. He’d been watching the minutes tick down. “Is everyone ready?” he asked Corner.

“Everyone’s in place,” he answered. “I’ve got the adults to agree to follow your lead, too,” he told Anthony, “for now.”

“That’s good,” replied Anthony. “Now” was all he needed.

“Are you ready?”

Anthony nodded and lifted his extendable bag, sign he was ready to disembark. “How are you doing?” Anthony asked Wycliff with concern.

“Better,” she whispered keeping her head down and her arms wrapped tightly around her body. Anthony noted she no longer wore the flower in her hair.

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To Anthony’s surprise, the prefects had reported all the students from the fall were on the Express plus one Nadia Turay. McGonagall would be pleased at the success of their campaign. After Anthony had talked to the Mudblood parents, the largest group of holdouts were the Sytherins, unwilling to risk the trip when they could get to Hogsmeade and from there to Hogwarts by other ways... Then Tom offered a 15% discount on
everything in his store to Slytherin students who took the Express. (one of the reasons why Anthony insisted
on a headcount…)

Unable to relax after the meeting, Anthony had visited every berth of the train. It was an appropriate
thing for a Headmistress’ Assistant to do. He thanked everyone (especially the Firsts) for their support, and
offered meaningless words of encouragement wherever it seemed appropriate. It also gave Anthony the
opportunity to personally meet and connect with the many leaders of the Wizard community who had decided
to come along.

The Firsts appeared more worried about reaching Hogsmeade and Hogwarts than H2; “Will we have to
be sorted again?” they asked anxiously.

“No if you don’t want to,” Anthony was able to assure them, He had had several meetings with
McGonagall concerning the educational progress of students at H2. While she insisted on letting her professors
determine the content knowledge of the students after ½ year of H2, she agreed with Anthony that, whether
right or wrong, the Wycliff-sorted students had bonded with their housemates and re-sorting would be
unnecessary.

“Will we get service at Hogwarts?” asked Wanda Woodbead (H1) worriedly.

“No,” answered Turner (H4) before Anthony could reply. That was fortunate, as he had absolutely no
idea what Woodbead was talking about.

“But … How will we be able to tell our parents we arrived safely?” Woodbead persisted.

“That’s what owls are for!” informed Louisa Barrington. (H3)
The answer did not seem to reassure Woodbead so Anthony added, “I’ll ask prefect Woods to take
you to the Owlry and show you how they are used to send messages tonight.” That’s how owls were used
though Anthony had no idea how that related to “service.” He made a mental note to tell the rest of the
prefects to do the same. “Service,” seemed important to Woodbead and perhaps was to the other Firsts
as well. They were still his base, and if a trip to the owlry made them happy…

Anthony found Paige sitting in a berth filled with family members and one Nadia Turay. Turay
regarded Anthony with icy disdain for a few seconds and then resumed reading her book, a History of
Magic, by Bathilda Bagshott. So much for appreciation for his part in waking her up. Turay had made a
brief public statement apologizing for all the trouble she had caused while confirming Thackeray’s story,
and, once released from the hospital, had gone with Thackeray back to the privacy of their home… Paige
had tried to make a check-up visit. Thackeray had sent Paige a Howler to telling her all visiting privileges
Like the rest of the people in the berth, Turay had several bags stacked around her. None of the other students did. They each carried a single simple extendable bag. Anthony wondered how Turay would fit in with the rest of the students having not been part of the H2 experience. He also wondered if she would change her story once she reached the safety of the Ravenclaw dorm.

Anthony spotted Wycliff curled up in the far corner of a berth filled with worried looking Hufflepuffs.

He would have left her there certain she would be safe with her friends, except Wycliff had pulled off her hair clip and was intently regarding the flower... “A word with you, Wycliff,” said Anthony in a commanding, but respectful voice.

“You’re supposed to be *wearing* that flower not *eating* it!” Anthony scolded once they were in the relative privacy of the aisle with a closed door between them and the other Hufflepuffs.

“Leave me alone!” she begged, “I relieved you of your promise; it’s not your problem!”

“If you die before we roll into Hogsmeade then I loose my very prestigious position of Headmistress’ Assistant!” Anthony told her bluntly.

“You don’t think we’ll make it to Hogsmeade any more than the rest of us do,” Wycliff replied being equally blunt.

“Then we all loose our healer and I can’t let that happen either.”

“There’s a real healer on board,” Wycliff told him stubbornly. “Several! You don’t need me!”

“That healer is unknown,” Anthony said. “Not like you. They all are! You’re the one everyone trusts,” he told her firmly. “What’s going on?” he questioned. “We haven’t even been kidnapped or anything! At least you can wait until we know for sure before, you, uh, you know!”

Wycliff shook her head. “Not the kidnapping, it’s the worry and fear,” she whispered.

“There’s so much! A whole train of it! This would stop it all,” she added looking longingly at the flower still in her hand.

Anthony stared. Worry? Fear? What the? “Well, can’t you block or something?” he asked.

“I have been,” she told him. “But it’s still there. *Everywhere!*”

“Didn’t you tell your friends?”

Wycliff shook her head. “They’d worry even more—like you!”

“Another berth?” Anthony suggested.

“They’re all the same,” Wycliff told him shaking her head yet again. “Cept, those with —without emo—oh no! That’s worse! I can’t bear to be around those I don’t know... What if one of them is the kid-napper?”

“This is ridiculous!” Anthony muttered. What was he to do? He could take away the flower but he
was sure Wycliff had more or other things equally lethal... Should he turn her over to Woods and tell her

to put Wycliff on another “suicide” watch? No. Their increased worry could tip Wycliff over the edge! On

the other hand, it was clear Wycliff couldn’t stay where she was... Corner! He’d done that salvage

survey! If there was anywhere on the Express with less emotions, he’d know about it! Plus, Corner had

sat with Wycliff when they had taken ill at H2 so Anthony wouldn’t have to give him a lot of explanations...

“Come with me!” Anthony told Wycliff starting down the aisle. “Well, come on!” he insisted when

she didn’t start moving with him. Anthony took Wycliff’s wrist—the one holding the flower and pulled

her along.

“Where!” she asked as the two moved swiftly down the aisle. Anthony didn’t bother answering

but kept moving stopping only to pull open the door to the berth where he remembered seeing Corner.

“Corner!” he announced without preliminaries, “I need to talk to you.”

Corner frowned but rose from his seat. “I won’t be long,” he told the others in the cabin, all 7th

days. “What is it?” he asked after moving close to Anthony.

“Is there someplace she can go,” Anthony held up Wycliff’s wrist, the one holding the deadly

flower, “that’s less ... intense? I think the emotions are getting to her...” Corner’s eyes took in the flower

and a look of alarm crossed his face; his eyebrows furrowed in thought. “The boiler!” he declared aloud.

“Only elves in there. I tried talking to them earlier and I don’t thing they realize the possible

gravity of the situation... Come on, Holly,” he added taking her hand and the two moved quickly out of

the car,

presumably for the boiler...”

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The Hogwarts Express slowed. Anthony Richards peered outside and could just barely see the station platform coming into view. “Now,” he commanded quietly.

“Now!” repeated Wycliff. Her house elf nodded its head, grabbed Albus Potter by the wrist and Apparated. They were to land on the road below the platform where the carriages would be waiting.

The Express rumbled to a stop. Anthony took a deep breath. “Now or never!” he muttered to himself and moved to the stairs.

“If it helps, I think we’re rolling into Hogsmeade, not H2,” said Corner from behind him.

“Oh?”

“Yes, I saw James Potter flying outside the window while we were coming up here; I don’t think he’d be doing that if we were entering H2.”

“Thanks.” It helped but didn’t change any plans. They still had to be sure. Anthony plastered a confident smile on his face and stepped off the Express...
Camera bulbs popped and flashed in his face blinding him. Anthony Richards determinedly ignored them, Rita and the quill floating under his nose, and looked about instead. The station was brightly lit, more so than he’d ever seen it before. On one side stood a crowd of people. McGonagall, in tartan plaid, stood proudly in the front. Behind her stood the professors. Behind them Anthony recognized Dean Thomas, head of Magical Law Enforcement and James Potter standing within a group of several witches and wizards all wearing Ministry colours and leaning heavily on brooms. They looked spattered, battered and worn. Anthony knew the group had all flown alongside the Express from London; it had to have been an exhausting trip.

Anthony purposefully walked up to McGonagall. He saw movement off to the side, where the carriages were waiting. Anthony risked a glance. Was that? Yes! Potter was scrambling on top of, nothing! He was clearly sitting astride something invisible! Potter had wide grin on his face and held his arms up making a “T” for Thestrals! Thestrals were there! One hurtle over, the biggest.

Anthony continued his walk and stopped in front of McGonagall. “Thank you for coming to meet us at the station,” Anthony began in a very loud but formal voice. He wanted everyone on the Express to be able to hear. “Are the professors ready with their lessons?”

“They are,” answered McGonagall in an equally loud voice.

“You will be pleased to learn there will be no bunking this term,” Anthony told McGonagall. “Everyone is present and accounted for.”

“That is good to hear,” replied McGonagall gravely. “Thank you.” Then she held out her hand. It was a gesture not expected between a Headmistress and Assistant, but one Anthony had specifically requested during their meetings about returning to Hogwarts. Anthony looked McGonagall squarely in the eyes, took the hand and shook. Her grip was firm and strong. Anthony breathed a mental sigh of relief; she didn’t vanish. Camera bulbs flashed all around. The handshake was sure to make the front page. But that wasn’t why Anthony had requested doing it. A very public handshake could be seen by all the students on the Express. The students would know for sure their professors would not vanish as they had in the fall. That, plus Potter, cavorting on top of an invisible Thestral was all the students needed to confirm they had indeed arrived at Hogsmeade and were on their way to Hogwarts, not H2.

Anthony turned to the Express. “Well?” he asked loudly. “The carriages are waiting. What are you doing still on the Express?”

A loud cheer sounded and students spilled out with a rush! They quickly lined up waiting for their carriage. Behind them came the adults. While the student got in the carriages and rolled off, Anthony posed for photos and answered interview questions. “Of course I knew the Express would arrive at Hogsmeade,” he told Rita confidently. “I had every confidence in the security measures put on place by the Ministry and Hogwarts governors…” “There were no problems riding the Express, it was just like every other time, except for all the adults, of course.” “Yes, I did hold a meeting and laid out a few minor plans should we arrive at H2, it was something to keep the prefects busy and feel needed…” The platform was fairly empty by the time he finished.

“You coming?” called out Scorpius.

Anthony looked and saw Scorpius standing with Wycliff, Pilkington, and Fitzpatrick. “What are you doing here?” he questioned.

“I’m not leaving without you,” said Wycliff firmly.

“And I’m not letting her go anywhere alone with you,” growled Fitzpatrick with open suspicion.

Pilkington shrugged. “We started this trip together; it’s only fitting we end it the same way…” “Whatever,” said Scorpius. “I don’t think there’s any more carriages and I don’t want to walk.”

“You definitely don’t want to walk,” agreed Wycliff. “It’s a long hike…” “Wasn’t planning to walk,” stated Fitzpatrick. “I brought a broom!” he grinned and held up his extendable bag… “But it’s cold out,” he reminded the group, “and a carriage would be much more comfortable…” “But only if it’s pulled by Thestrals,” said Wycliff.
“Which it is,” assured Potter pulling himself on top of the “empty” space in front of the carriage.
“What are you still doing here?” questioned Anthony.
“Didn’t want the first few carriages to be a fluke of some sort,” he answered. “So I’ve been checking them all!” Potter slid off the invisible Thestral and climbed into the carriage. “You coming?” he invited cheerfully. “I didn’t spot any other Thestrals coming up…”


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Chapter 31

“Positively wasteful!” whispered Scorpius in Anthony Richard’s ear.

“Keep it to yourself!” Anthony whispered back though he thoroughly agreed with Scorpius.

They were sitting at a celebratory meal welcoming the return of the students. Students and family ate together in the hall. The families would stay the night in tents pitched on the lawn and would return home the next day. It boggled Anthony’s mind how wasteful everyone was, how the food flowed everywhere, half-eaten rolls, barely touched slices of meat ignored in favour of other courses that magically appeared. This would have never been permitted at H2. Anthony could remember how they would have fought for a chance to eat the scraps so carelessly left behind. But he bit his tongue and kept his thoughts to himself.

Anthony was sitting at the head table with the Headmistress, Hogwarts Governors, and professors. As Headmistress’ Assistant, and for his efforts in bringing the students to Hogwarts, Anthony was given the position of honour at the head table. But he didn’t want to be there alone so he insisted on “honouring” the Advisors too, Scorpius in particular, and the rest because it was the only way to get Scorpius. It was only right. The Advisors would return to obscurity now that the Headmistress and professors would be there to manage things. Anthony’s role as Assistant was also uncertain, but he would worry about that later. Only the prefects would continue on as before, or not. Anthony had already heard O’Shea planned to challenge his appointment of Basu to the prefect position. If she won, it would destroy whatever status he had left at Hogwarts.

The meal seemed to drag on forever. Anthony noticed he and the advisors quit eating long before the adults and their plates were empty with not the slightest scrap left behind… Despite his disapproval, Anthony kept his head up and a smile on his face. It would be his last chance for photos before classes began in earnest the next day.

Finally, the meal ended and people rose to leave. The Prefects called out all the firsts to lead them to the owlry and then to their dorm. Of course, the Firsts already knew the way to the owlry and the dorms; they had just never seen actual owls in the owlry nor been in the dorms, not really… (Yes, the prefects had already checked to see if the dorms opened properly with passwords… The boys bathrooms were also open again, much to Scorpius’ expressed relief.) The other students clustered with family and friends before turning in for the night. Anthony had one more thing to do before he could stretch out in their dorm… Looking around, he spotted the person he wanted.

“Mr. Potter,” he called out in a respectful voice. “May I have a word with you?”

Potter (Harry) had been headed towards the stairs. He veered towards Anthony. Anthony walked in his direction stopping when they were face to face. Potter was taller than Anthony, but not by much. He looked curiously at Anthony with his green eyes and waited. Paige was right, deliberate silence put others on the defensive when trying to speak… But this was not a frivolous conversation just to be seen with Potter.

“It’s about Wycliff,” Anthony began in a low voice. Potter did not reply, but Anthony knew he had Potter’s full attention. “I presume you know she’s suicidal?” If he didn’t he should. He was supposed to be her legal guardian. Anthony was fairly certain the Hufflepuffs wouldn’t keep that information from him. Potter regarded him steadily without speaking. Anthony took that for a “yes.”

“It shouldn’t be much of a concern now that we’re at Hogwarts,” he continued, “but I wonder, do her parents know?” Potter continued to stare at Anthony without speaking. It might have been intimidating, except Anthony had had a lot of practice with silence after being around Paige…

“Normally I wouldn’t bother you about such things, except, that flower she’s wearing,” Anthony nodded his head towards Wycliff, who had left the platform and was joining her Hufflepuff friends. Potter looked as well. “It’s nightshade! I know that clip’s not available on Diagon Alley… (or Knockturn)… and, um, I got this off her before we boarded the train…” Anthony held out the bottles he had gotten from Wycliff. Potter’s hand lifted and opened; Anthony placed the stuff in his—

“POP!”
“Harry Potter thanking Mr. Richards for bringing all the students safely to Hogwarts!” came Rita’s silky voice. “Potter fans will love it!”

Potter’s eyes flashed angrily. But still, he didn’t speak.

Anthony released the bottles; Potter’s hand closed around them. Then Potter’s hand went into his pocket while Anthony casually moved his own hand to brush back his hair. “I wasn’t looking my best,” he protested to Rita. “Perhaps you could shoot that photo again?” he requested and held out his hand expectantly at Potter. That last photo would have never looked like a proper handshake. People would wonder what was really going on.

Potter looked at Anthony thoughtfully. Then he removed his hand (empty now,) and took Anthony’s. “Thank you,” he said in a low voice as he shook Anthony’s hand. Anthony smiled as the camera lights flashed again. They both knew that the “thanks” was not for leading students to Hogwarts.

Anthony smiled to himself as he left the platform. Not only would he not have to worry about Paige and/or disposing toxic stuff, but the famous Harry Potter now “owed” him.

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Anthony Richards fingered the suit thoughtfully as he placed it in the school drawer. “What’d you bring that old thing for,” questioned Scorpius derisively.

“Just because,” answered Anthony vaguely. He wasn’t sure why he brought it. Certainly, he’d packed along lots better suits for this term. But still… He could remember the pride and pleasure he’d had when he first put it on, able to wear something different. “Adderson?” he called out.

“Yes?”

“You bring anything along from H2?”

“A couple things…”

“Planning to keep them?”

“Haven’t thought about it. Probably not now that we’re at Hogwarts…”

“I’ll take them,” he offered.

“Why?”

“Bonfire?” answered Anthony aloud. “Something big and splashy to celebrate our return to Hogwarts.”

“That works!” said Gruffudd. “Count me in!” He tossed a pair of blue gloves on Anthony’s bed.

“Thanks. Anyone else?” asked Anthony aloud. More gloves, a scarf and a hat were tossed his way. “Thanks.”

“When do you plan on burning them,” Bernard Bletchley asked.

“Not sure, have to check with McGonagall first…” Anthony answered vaguely as he gathered up the things and stuffed them into his extendable bag. “But I want it to be a big fire,” he added. “Pass the word I’m collecting anything and everything from H2…”

“You’re not into bonfires,” whispered Malfoy. “What’s really up?”

“Souvenirs!” Anthony whispered back. “If there really is no more H2, then these things will be worth a mint in a couple of years. I’ll pay 5 knuts per item made in H2…”

“Make it 10 and I can get Adderson and Corwin to help…” volunteered Scorpius.

“Done.”

**********

“So they arrived safely?” questioned father worriedly.

“They did,” answered Cousin Harry Potter. “All two hundred fifty eight.” Cousin Harry, father, mum and Vernon Wycliff were all seated around a coffee table in the living room. Kenny Perkins, still visiting Vernon, had remained discreetly in the bedroom. Cousin Harry had arrived at 8:00am sharp, as promised, to give them the results of the train trip. A failure to appear would let them know the train, Cousin Harry included, had vanished again... Mum had tea and biscuits ready
but no one was eating them. It was the information that mattered, not the food.

Vernon leaned back with relief. The whole family had been worried. Knowing Cousin Harry intended to make the trip with them had not reduced that worry; he could have easily vanished with the rest of the students...

“The trip went smoothly with no incident,” Cousin Harry added.

“That’s nice. Uh, thanks for letting us know,” mumbled father. He was never his best when trying to be nice to Cousin Harry.

“No problem,” answered Cousin Harry. He turned his eyes towards Vernon. “Would you be good enough to let the others know?”

“Uh, yeah,” agreed Vernon. He’d make sure to write about the visit after Cousin Harry left. Not that he needed to.

That very private support group Vernon had started had already reported the arrival of students to Hogwarts, several writers having gotten word late last night and early morning (like 2-3am) by “owl,” whatever that was. It had to be an anagram for something; Vernon couldn’t imagine someone like Cousin Harry using something as old fashioned as birds to carry messages let alone using owls if they did. Nor did he believe owls could travel fast enough to bring word to families so quickly. Vernon hadn’t asked. It was a question he was saving to ask Holly later. It was best to not mention things he learned from the support group in front of father.

Vernon had to do a lot of explaining when father had learned that “that lot” wanted Vernon to attend one of their meetings… Father had calmed down a bit when Cousin Harry was able to affirm that it wasn’t “that lot” but those related to “that lot” who wanted to meet Vernon. But still, father had made it abundantly clear he wanted to hear nothing about them ever again, ever!

Cousin Harry, while he hadn’t seemed angry, had pulled Vernon aside and quietly given him a very long lecture about something called “unplottable magic” and how Vernon’s actions had endangered the safety of his family. Mr. Pilkington had gone further explaining how “unplottable magic” supposedly worked and what all the families had to do to keep the “unplottable” spell from breaking while at the meeting. It was the only way they would let Vernon attend. Otherwise, Vernon would have had to stay in a separate room away from “wizard” eyes…

Vernon had followed Mr. Pilkington’s directions; he had sat quietly on the side and did nothing to bring attention to himself. Holly, Cousin Harry and Mr. Pilkington kept their distance further drawing the attention from Vernon. It was weird how the Headmistress and her Assistant seemed to look right through him as did the students present. On the other hand, several of the parents welcomed the chance to exchange words with Vernon on the pretext of getting a drink. Some confided that they would have given up hope of ever seeing their children again were it not for Vernon’s words. Afterwards, Mr. Pilkington declared the meeting a success.

Later, the students, Holly included, had gone to the train station to take the train to Hogwarts. They didn’t return but had they gotten to Hogwarts? The wait had been nerve-wracking. Mum and father had paced all day and all through the night. Vernon hadn’t slept either. He spent his time monitoring the support group for word of anything, wondering whether he should pass on to his parents the news he heard or wait for Cousin Harry’s arrival to confirm the news, if he arrived…

“What happens now?” asked father.

“They attend class,” answered Cousin Harry simply.

“And the kidnapper?” asked mum worriedly.

“He’s still out there,” admitted Cousin Harry. “So we’ll be having extra security around the school… And several of us will be accompanying the students back to Kings Cross Station when the term ends.” He pulled off his glasses and wiped them clean with a handkerchief. “Um, it might be a good idea if you kept a closer eye on Holly while she’s with you,” Cousin Harry suggested in a hesitant voice, “at least until we capture the kidnappers…”

“What do you mean?” growled father.

Cousin Harry reached into his pocket, pulled out a small pill container and placed it on the coffee table between them. Father solemnly picked up the bottle, looked at it and passed it to mum. She turned two shades paler as she looked at it before setting it back on the coffee table. Vernon
picked it up. It was filled with pills of different shapes and sizes. He gulped. Grandfather’s name was clearly written on the bottle. The last time they had discussed pills with Cousin Harry, the bottles had been empty and Holly had amnesia. She’d been really messed up then.

“She shouldn’t have gone back!” growled father. He had several loud arguments about that very topic with Holly but she had been adamant about returning. The final reluctant agreement had included a guarantee that Winky would come along.

“No, she shouldn’t have,” agreed Cousin Harry. “But we made it to Hogwarts safely so I think there’s nothing to worry about for now, but still…”

“Yes, of course,” interjected mum. “We’ll keep a closer watch at home. Thank you for letting us know.”

Cousin Harry nodded his head in acknowledgement. “One other thing,” he added again returning his gaze to Vernon. “I know Holly hasn’t a computer so I am wondering if you might be able to find out how she got a hold of these…” He pulled out a second bottle of unlabeled pills and placed them on the coffee table.

“What are they?” questioned father as Vernon picked up the bottle and gently shook the oval pills within.

“Cyanide.”

**********

Anthony Richards and Scorpius walked to the dorms after dinner. It had been a grueling first day at Hogwarts. Students moved about with the usual hustle and bustle of the first day of class, trying to find rooms and professors. The Professors spent their time trying to determine what the students knew and didn’t know from the regular curriculum. There was talk of holding a summer session to offset the lack of a fall Term. Anthony was keenly aware of every topic not covered during the fall term and felt as if the weight of student academic progress had fallen totally on his shoulders. He was the one in charge, after all. But it wasn’t fair to punish everyone with extra classes because of H2. Yeah, so they didn’t cover everything while they were struggling to stay alive. Surely their life experiences should count for something… Anthony intended to wait for the Professors to finish their assessments and then argue against any proposed additional classes…

The two were just about to enter their dorm when Ivy Malfoy “appeared” out of the wall nearby. (That disillusionment charm was taught to all the Slytherins while at H2 where hiding would have its distinct advantages…) “I wouldn’t go in there if I were you,” she advised.

“Oh? Why?”

“There you are!” said Slytherin First Taj Mallick running up from behind. “You’ve got to do something! She’s gone crazy!”

“Who!” asked Anthony drawing his wand in alarm.

“O’Shea,” answered Ivy.

“Why,” asked Anthony after he said the dorm password. The portrait swung open revealing a familiar dark passage.

“McGonagall refused her petition to remain Prefect,” Ivy continued as Anthony stepped into the passageway. “She’s a little angry.” Scorpius, Ivy and Taj followed Anthony into the common room.

A little angry was an understatement. The Slytherin common room looked like a whirlwind had struck—broken glass, smashed furniture, sofa and pillow fluff everywhere! There was more damage than Moaning Myrtle had done to the Girl’s bathroom! In the center was Manasa Basu, wearing jeans and a vibrant pink and turquoise tunic, (kurti, she called it.) Her black hair was neatly braided in back and decorated with a spray of tiny white flowers. She was seated on the floor, wand in one hand, appearing to calmly read a book!

“What’s going on?” questioned Anthony.

“And you!” screeched O’Shea aiming her wand towards Anthony.

“Expelliamus!” shouted Basu before O’Shea had a chance to cast her own spell. O’Shea
slammed against the wall next to the fireplace as her wand slipped from her fingers.

“Accio wand!” continued Basu quickly while dropping the book into her lap and holding out her hand. O’Shea’s wand flew neatly into Basu’s palm and her fingers curled around it. Basu set the book on the floor and stood in a single fluid motion. “You get your wand back as soon as you clean up this mess!” she told O’Shea.

“You can’t do that!” exclaimed O’Shea angrily.
“I just have!” Basu told O’Shea calmly.
“You have no right!”
“I am prefect!” Basu answered. “I have every right! Unless, the Headmistress’ Assistant wishes to over-ride me…” She looked over at Anthony expectantly.
“No,” agreed Anthony looking around the room. He had the feeling Basu had been waiting for Anthony to arrive before disarming O’Shea. “You make a mess, you should clean it up!”
“And how am I supposed to do that with no wand?”
“Play Muggle!” answered Basu coldly. She’d endured numerous Slytherin taunts after her wand broke. Anthony knew Basu had no sympathy for anyone who complained about being wandless.

“Um, you could pay someone else to clean it,” suggested Anthony thoughtfully knowing O’Shea would never lift a finger to clean. “It would be good practice for them. Cash up front!” he added as he was within hearing of Taj and Ivy; they’d pass the word. O’Shea glared. “But if you’re short on cash, I could pay for it, give the bill to the Headmistress who will forward it on to your parents; you’ll get your wand back once I’m reimbursed… In fact, I’ll be doing that anyway if this place isn’t fixed by morning,” Anthony added knowing the house elves would pick up for no charge once the students went off to class. How had they ever managed at H2 without house elves? “In the meantime, I’m going to bed, I presume our sleeping quarters are untouched?” he asked Basu.

“Of course,” answered Basu proudly.
Anthony turned, picked his way carefully through the mess and headed to bed.

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“Thank you for coming,” began Anthony Richards. He was sitting in the Room of Requirement at a shiny black round table. With him sat Scorpius, Pilkington, Wycliff and Fitzpatrick. They didn’t have to come; their services as Advisors were no longer needed. Anthony was glad they had; he felt a loss in his day, no longer needing to discuss daily operations. Perhaps they did too. He also wanted some help with something.

“There’s talk of setting up a summer term or remedial classes to offset what we didn’t learn during the Fall,” he began. “I want to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Only because you’d be first in line,” observed Fitzpatrick bluntly. “Seeing as how you didn’t attend any of the classes.”

“I did too!” argued Anthony. “Just not as much,” he admitted. Dueling, Defense Against the Dark Arts and Charms (the curses and hexes part) had been big on his list. Corner refused to teach him Occlumency saying it would interfere with his other duties, whatever that meant. That was fine by Anthony—he doubted Corner was good enough at anything to teach anyway. “But the students should not be punished for circumstances out of their control,” he added piously meaning being stuck in H2. That was something they could all agree on. The group obligingly brainstormed arguments and proposals he could use with McGonagall.

When that wound down, Anthony brought up the other reason for the meeting. “Anything interesting about Turay?” he asked in a casual voice.

“Turay?” questioned Wycliff. She wore some white flower that gave off a sweet scent when her head moved—Longbottom had confiscated her nightshade one the moment Wycliff had walked into class and said very firmly, “Not at Hogwarts!”

“Yes, Turay,” repeated Anthony.
“Watch Turay!” Those were the last words Paige had said before leaving to return to London.
So Anthony had been watching her, as best he could which wasn’t easy considering they were at different levels, houses and classes. Turay did not sit in her usual seat at the Ravenclaw table. Nor did she eat porridge and read books as Nellie had done… Different, but nothing alarming or earth-shattering.

“I know the Ministry hasn’t charged her,” Anthony continued. *(Mainly because she was clearly too young to have created H2 and in the absence of witnesses or tangible evidence against her the Ministry couldn’t charge or send Turay to Azkaban.)* “But the fact remains Turay’s memories were used to create H2. As far as I am concerned, Turay is the key to everything! Her and Nellie.” Anthony had practiced in advance what he wanted to say so it could be said without lying.

Anthony paused a moment before continuing. “Now, I don’t think Turay is a kidnapper, but H2 was still based on her memories. And when we figure out how it was done, we will be one step closer to the actual kidnappers. So, what does Turay have to say about everything?” he asked, directing his question to Pilkington. The two were Ravenclaws; they surely talked in the common room.

“She doesn’t,” stated Pilkington bluntly.

“You didn’t ask?” questioned Anthony in disbelief. Everyone looked at Pilkington expectantly.

Pilkington did not reply immediately. Finally she spoke. “Did we ask her why her memories were apparently used to create H2? Of course not! As you said, she is the only connection to the kidnapper, asking that might alert the kidnapper… We did ask why she was not on the Express in the fall.”

“And what did she say?”

“She said she was afraid of retribution from the Slytherins…”

“And with good reason!” exclaimed Fitzpatrick. “You made some very nasty threats against her last year and I don’t like the way you’re treating Nadia like she’s a criminal! She hasn’t done anything wrong!” he said with conviction. “We should be asking for her help! There’s probably a simple explanation as to how the kidnappers got her memories.”

“Yeah, she helped the kidnappers!” said Scorpius dryly.

“No, she didn’t!” asserted Wycliff strongly. “At least I don’t think so…” she amended. “But it’s been over six months since I last saw her. Things happen. People change. Perhaps she found a, a hand, or something!” Wycliff looked pointedly at Anthony as she said that; he winced inwardly at her words. “We need to wait before including her in the investigation,” Wycliff concluded aloud.

“That’s easily solved,” stated Fitzpatrick. “Why don’t you get an emotional read off her, Holly? Then we’d know for sure instead of this “wait and see stuff…”

An excellent idea, but one Anthony didn’t dare suggest; Wycliff would have accused him of trying to use her…

Wycliff looked down at the table. A black band suddenly appeared on the table, which she immediately grabbed and started pulling and tugging on. It stretched back and forth with her efforts. Everyone waited. “Can’t,” she whispered finally while keeping her eyes fixed on the band she kept jerking.

“Can’t or won’t,” accused Scorpius.

“Can’t,” she whispered again. “Nadia practices Oc-occulmency now…”

“Really?” thought Anthony. “That’s interesting and something he could report to Paige. Turay was a little young to do Occlumency but some Slytherin families insisted their children learn it earlier.”

“So how are we supposed to find out Turay’s connection to the kidnappers without asking her?” exclaimed Fitzpatrick with frustration.

“We watch,” said Anthony firmly. “Which, I presume you’ve already been doing,” he added looking at Pilkington. She nodded.

“So, have you noticed anything?”

“Nothing she’s said,” Pilkington answered.

“What about things she’s done?” Anthony persisted.
“No,” whispered Pilkington. “We still sleep … outside…” Anthony gulped. The Ravenclaw dorm was the only one that had refreshed while they were at H2. The Ravenclaws never slept there; what would it happen if it refreshed while they were sleeping in a bed? No one wanted to find out. They obviously didn’t trust the dorm at Hogwarts yet… Turay would not have that concern.
“What else?” asked Wycliff abruptly.
“We still use the dorm,” Pilkington began, “but not for sleeping so we saw...” she broke off. “It’s nothing, really,” she started again, “but Turay didn’t sleep in her usual bed.”
“Didn’t sleep?” Anthony turned that over in his mind. If he had his pick of all the beds in the dorm, would he sleep in the bed he now used? Probably. But maybe not. He could remember once envying the bed the prefect slept in as somehow being connected to being a prefect… “Uh, whose bed did she sleep in?” he asked cautiously.
“Prefect Moore’s,” she answered bluntly.
“Makes sense,” declared Scorpius aloud. “She’s an ambitious Ravenclaw. That fits with the Occlumency, too.”
“Or she has an ambitious grandmother who has plans that include H2…” suggested Pilkington.
That was getting a bit too close. “Why don’t we do some more watching before we make conclusions,” suggested Anthony aloud. “I suggest we meet again, what? Tomorrow? Same time?” Everyone nodded. Anthony rose breaking the muffliato spell he’d cast. It probably wasn’t necessary in the real Room of Requirement, but it felt right to do. Everyone else got up too; they left the room without lingering. They all had schoolwork still to do.

**********
Anthony Richards checked his appearance in the mirror one last time; he combed his hair again and straightened his robes making sure his badge was level. The prefect bath was marvelous! The sunken tub filled with super heated water was the only way to spend a cold evening at Hogwarts. Those extra faucets pouring water in from all sides made it feel like a total body massage! Had he known, he would have insisted they put such a tub in at H2. If he never did anything else as Headmistress’ Assistant, he’d still have access to the prefect bathroom and that would be worth it.

Bracing himself for the chill of the halls, Anthony stepped outside the bathroom.

“Stupify!”

**********

Cold! Unbelievably cold! So cold he couldn’t even move!

**********

Holly Wycliff sat on the sofa in the Hufflepuff Common room and reviewed all the assigned work she had left to do. It was a lot. She knew N.E.W.T. level work was supposed to be tough; she had no idea how tough. Worse, she hadn’t taken any of the N.E.W.T. level classes offered at H2; she’d been too busy tutoring, monitoring student health and staying next to Richards. Holly sighed. Was there anything she’d done at H2 that could be applied?

“Holly?” Holly looked up.
Prefect and Head Girl Jennifer Woods stepped into the room. “You’ve a visitor outside,” she told Holly.

“Oh?”

“Yes. It’s Corner.”

Holly mentally cringed. Jeremy Corner was nice enough, but he practiced Occlumency and that made him nerve wracking to be around.

“Thanks. What’s it about?” Holly asked while she closed her books and stood.

“He didn’t say,” replied Jennifer. “But it must be important or he wouldn’t be bothering you at this hour…”

Holly nodded. Holding Sasha in her arms, Holly went through their passageway to the entrance.

“Hi, Holly,” greeted Jeremy. “I need your help with something.”

“What?”

“Get your robes,” he said instead. “I’ll explain along the way…”

Well, it was Jeremy. (Sasha confirmed it.) So Holly went back inside and fetched her robes joining Jeremy outside a few minutes later.

“What’s this about?” Holly questioned as they began walking down the hall.

“Richards is missing,” Jeremy said in a low voice.

“He is?”

“Maybe,” answered Jeremy. Holly waited for further explanation. “Geoffrey Bromadge (S1) was doing the 10:00 pm head check,” he began. “Yeah, I know we’re at Hogwarts now, but old habits die hard and he did a head count anyway. Richards was missing. He asked about it and Malfoy said he was taking a bath… So Bromadge checked all the bathrooms and couldn’t find him. He returned to the dorms and Richards still hadn’t showed so Bromadge told me. That was the procedure, remember?”

“So, he’s missing, right?”
“Maybe,” answered Jeremy. “There’s one bathroom Bromadge couldn’t have checked, the Prefect’s Bathroom, so we’re going to check that first…”

“You don’t need me for that…”

“No, but if Richards is there, it’s been for a very long time so he might be in trouble…”

“And if he’s not there?”

“That’s why I want you, or, rather, your cat…”

“Sasha?”

“Yes, you do have her with you don’t you?”

“Of course,” Holly admitted. Student cats weren’t supposed to be in the halls, but Holly never went anywhere without Sasha. She had a Healer’s note to that effect, if anyone objected. So far, no one had said anything. Of course, Sasha was usually under a disillusionment spell so she was hard to notice.

“When we were looking all over Hogwarts for you a couple of years ago, It occurred to me that you might be under a disillusionment spell and we could walk right past you and never notice,” began Jeremy. “Your cat, she knows Richards doesn’t she? Would know if he was nearby, disillusionment spell or not?”

“That’s usually done with dogs,” informed Holly.

“Yeah, can you see Fang tramping up and down the halls?” Holly laughed while imagining Professor Hagrid’s borehound in Hogwarts. “No!” she agreed. “And yes, Sasha knows Anthony and could probably find him disillusionment spell or not.”

“That’s what I was hoping,” nodded Jeremy…

“But a Homonum Revelio spell would do just a well,” reminded Holly.

“True, but then it would be obvious to anyone nearby I’m looking for someone and I’d really rather not advertise what I’m up to. Also, I wouldn’t have a chance to talk with you. How are you?”

“Fine,” answered Holly shortly. She was always uncomfortable when people started asking about her health…

“I noticed you weren’t wearing that flower any more,” Jeremy stated. “I was hoping it meant you were feeling less, uh, suicidally inclined…”

“Actually it means Professor Longbottom saw it and took it away!” Holly answered bluntly. “Well, he’s the Herbology professor,” said Jeremy dismissively. “He obviously knows about things like that…”

“Well, Basu never said anything,” Holly said defensively.

“She’s not your professor,” Jeremy reminded, “not now anyway. But I do think she said something—just not to you. How else do you think Richards knew you were in trouble on the train?”

Holly felt her face warm.

“Suicide should not be an option,” Jeremy continued sternly. “I told you before we’d get out of it and we did,” he reminded Holly. “When things get tough, you can’t just quit; you’ve got to keep trying.”

“Yes, sir,” Holly said in a small voice. They turned a corner and continued walking. “Where is the Prefects’ Bathroom anyway?” she asked as they rounded a corner taking a turn that did not lead to the stairway.

“The fifth floor like your dorm,” answered Jeremy, but in the West Wing.

“Oh.”

“You’re not going to stop carrying around a poison flower or two just in case are you?” Jeremy questioned shrewdly.

“No,” Holly admitted.

“Then think what will happen if you do succeed in killing yourself. You’ll be ruining a lot of lives besides your own. Your parents will be devastated. You’ve a brother, and your cat, and Winky. Winky adores you. What will happen to her if you’re gone? Will her family keep her on? Can they?”
“I don’t know,” answered Holly softly. Perhaps Wizard Pilkington knew. She’d have to look into it… Winky shouldn’t suffer because of her…
“Will you promise me this,” Jeremy continued, “the next time you feel inclined to, ah, end it all, will you at least talk to someone first, your family, if possible, your friends, Woods, or me?”
“Yes, sir,” agreed Holly softly. She must not have sounded too convincing because then Jeremy added, “And if that doesn’t work, talk to Richards.”
“Richards?” questioned Holly in surprise. “Why him? He has nothing to do with this!”
“He’s been involved ever since that first night at H2. You think he doesn’t know what’s at stake should you die?”
“I absolved him of his promise!” Holly said defensively. ‘We’re out of H2!’
“That won’t help,” Jeremy told her. “The moment it comes out Richards knew what you were up to and didn’t stop it, his career is ruined! And it’s a good one! I know you don’t particularly like him, but Richards is not a bad person. I should think he deserves a bit of advance notice before you destroy his life…”
“Yes, sir,” said Holly meekly.
“The bathroom is just ahead,” Jeremy said as they rounded yet another corner. Holly stopped. Sasha had just headbutted her leg and had dug a claw into her foot.
“What is it?” questioned Jeremy stopping as well.
“Someone’s here!” she answered drawing her wand. She couldn’t sense anything so it was probably someone practicing Occlumency…
“Homonum Revelio!” shouted Jeremy. He aimed his wand down the side corridor. The tip glowed green. Someone was definitely there! “We know you’re here,” he said aloud. “Come out!” Nothing happened. Jeremy reached into his robes and brought out a small drawstring bag. He opened it, placed his fingers inside, drew them out, again holding something and tossed it onto the area in front of them.
“What’s that?” questioned Holly curiously while looking at the scattered stuff in front of them. It looked like dirt or sand but seemed to glitter and sparkle.
“Floo powder,” answered Jeremy briefly as he drew out some more and cast it further down the corridor.
“Floo powder?”
“Yeah, something I wanted to try at H2, if I only had some…” he added explaining, not that it made much sense to Holly. What the heck was floo powder?
“There!” he said pointing. Holly obligingly looked. “What?” she asked not seeing anything different and not knowing what she should be looking at.
“The powder didn’t land on the floor,” Jeremy explained. “See?” Holly looked again. Sure enough, there were some flecks of sparkle suspended in the air. Jeremy tossed some more powder in the same direction. Watching, Holly could see the powder stopped short of actually landing on the floor. “It’s someone lying down,” observed Jeremy aloud. He put his wand away and stepped to the invisible person. Reaching down, his hand abruptly vanished. Jeremy gave a sharp tug with the rest of his arm and suddenly the stiffened body of Richards appeared. His skin was purplish blue and he only wore an undershirt and shorts.
“Finite!” shouted Holly recognizing the stiffness was the results of a spell. Richards’ body immediately became limp. “Is he alive?” she asked with concern unable to feel any emotions at all.
“I think so,” affirmed Jeremy. “But he’s cold, real cold. Wingardium leviosa!” he
commanded aiming his wand at Richards. The limp body floated off the floor. “We need to get him to the bathroom,” he told her.

Holly nodded. She turned to go with them when her foot stepped on something. She looked down in time to see some clothes appear. It looked like Richard’s robe, maybe a shirt and pants. Moving them had broken their disillusionment charm. “You go on,” she told Jeremy as she bent down to pick up the clothes. “I’ll catch up.”

Jeremy nodded and proceeded to move Richards around the corner. Holly carefully used her free hand and felt around some more… Two shoes and some socks appeared. Then she felt something slender, hard and roundish, it was a wand! Holly picked it up. No, it was a broken piece of a wand…

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Jeremy Corner floated Richards down the corridor, turned the corner and down the next corridor stopping at a huge painting depicting a scene of an ancient Roman Bath. The small gold plate attached on the bottom part of the frame had the title: Prefect’s Bath. The painting showed a large indoor pool of sparkling blue water with white columns and Roman statues decorating the sides.

A plump looking Roman with short sandy coloured hair wearing a laurel wreath on his head lounged in the pool. He looked lazily at Jeremy and asked, “Quod est Verbum secretum?” That was Latin for “What is the secret word?” “Password” not being part of the Latin vocabulary.

“Lemon Citrus,” answered Jeremy. The Roman smiled and the portrait frame swung open revealing a huge room. “Holly?” called Jeremy looking about for her. But Holly was not in sight. That was weird. It shouldn’t have taken that long to pick up Richards’ stuff. But he’d have to worry about it later. Richards was too cold, too still. He had to get warmed up immediately. “Holly?” he called again. “I’m going in! The password is “Lemon Citrus.” There was no response.

Jeremy floated Richards into the bathroom. He got into the empty tub and carefully lowered Richards onto the marble tub floor. Using his wand, Jeremy caused all the gold faucets that lined the tub to open at once and hot steaming water flowed out filling the tub. No, it wasn’t exactly hot, but it felt that way compared to how cold Richards was. Heedless of getting wet, Jeremy stayed with Richards and kept his head out of the rising water willing the warmth that surrounded Richards to warm him as well.

After a few minutes, Richards’ eyes fluttered open. “Wh—what?” he questioned in a confused voice.

“Be still,” advised Jeremy. “Everything’s O.K. You’re in the bath,” Jeremy informed Richards. “We found you in the halls,” Jeremy continued, “You were really cold,” he added, “so we brought you to the baths to warm up.

Some of the confusion left Richards’ eyes. “We?” he questioned.

“Wycliff and me,” Jeremy answered. “You think you’re warm enough to get out?” “Out?”

“Yeah, Wycliff’s still outside and I need to tell her you’re O.K. You are, aren’t you?” Holly should have shown by now! Jeremy was mentally kicking himself for not waiting, or not insisting she come along—someone had attacked Richards and he had stupidly left Holly alone out there in his haste to help Richards! At the same time he couldn’t leave Richards in the tub. He was too weak and the tub was so huge he could drown…

“I guess…”

“Good.” Jeremy moved Richards over to the edge of the tub. “Who did this?” he asked as he helped Richards out of the tub and to a nearby bench.

“I don’t know… Just a whispered voice,” Richards told him. “Wh-where are my clothes?” he added looking at his body.

“Wycliff was getting them,” answered Jeremy. He pulled out his wand. “Accio towels!” he commanded. Several heated towels flew into Jeremy’s hands. He draped them over Richards’
shoulders. “I’ve got to let her in!” he told Anthony. Perhaps she just hadn’t heard the password…

“I shouldn’t be too long.”

“Taking baths with your clothes on?” questioned a feminine voice.

Jeremy looked towards the sound and saw a translucent image of a young girl with thick glasses wearing Hogwarts robes sitting on the water in the center of the tub. “Ah, Myrtle!” he said with recognition. He’d never actually met the ghost before, but he knew of her existence and where she could be found. “It’s so good to see you!” Jeremy added with open relief. After a quick inspection of the Prefects’ Bathroom to assure himself that it actually existed, something not at H2, Moaning Myrtle was the reason why Jeremy had no intention of actually using the Prefects’ Bathroom.

“It is?” she asked with surprise. Myrtle was supposedly confined to the Girls bathrooms but because the Prefect’s bath permitted both genders, she could go there as well. Jeremy had heard stories about Moaning Myrtle. Not only was Myrtle a student who had died at Hogwarts, but she had apparently been suffering from raging hormones at the time. She had a habit of appearing when boys were using the bath at the most inappropriate times saying things that made them feel “uncomfortable.”

“Yes. This is Anthony Richards, the Headmistress’ Assistant,” he added making introductions. “He’s very famous. And he came here just to meet you!” Jeremy ad-libbed.

“Oh?” Myrtle said with interest. She rose from the pool and flew over to the two.

“He was, uh, wondering what sort of changes you think should be made to make Hogwarts better…”

“Really?”

“Yes, I told him I couldn’t think of anyone who would know more about that than you…”

“Really?” Myrtle floated closer to Richards looking for confirmation.

Jeremy leaned over to Richards. “You’ve no wand and I’ve got to find Wycliff,” he whispered. “No one will try anything while Myrtle’s here…”

“Uh, yeah,” agreed Richards with reluctance. “Wh-what do you think?”

“Well,” Myrtle began while hovering even closer to Richards. “First of all, I think ghosts should be able to go wherever they wish, don’t you?”

“I’ll be back soon!” Jeremy promised while quickly backing away leaving Anthony alone with Myrtle.

**********

Holly was not waiting outside the door. “Holly?” called out Jeremy Corner. “Holly, where are you?” No answer. Jeremy drew his wand. Perhaps she had gone to the Infirmary to report things instead… But deep down, he didn’t believe that. Something was wrong and it was all his fault. They both knew someone had attacked Richards; he should have never left without Holly! Jeremy walked down the hall and turned the corner to check where he had seen Holly last. To his immense relief, Jeremy found Holly kneeling on the floor. She had her wand in one hand and was looking at something in the other. A pile of clothes and a pair of shoes were on the floor next to her. She looked fine but she wasn’t moving. Why was she still there?

“Holly?”

“Expelliarmus!” Jeremy’s wand flew out of his hand. Holly had turned with unbelievable swiftness and shouted her spell while standing before Jeremy had even realized she was attacking! “Obliviate!” screamed Holly while aiming her wand at Jeremy yet again. Only the defensive reflexes that came from auror dueling enabled Jeremy to instinctively move away and dodge the spell.

“Holly! It’s me, Jeremy!” Jeremy shouted while changing his location yet again. What was wrong? Holly’s body was stiff, her eyes were wide and she spoke with an intensity he had never heard before. Was she under an Imperius Curse?

“Obliviate!” screamed Holly again and Jeremy could feel the heat of the spell as it passed
overhead. Jeremy moved, paused and moved again successfully dodging yet another “Obliviate!” The corridor filled with the odor of Eucalyptus.

“Holly!” Jeremy called again as he kept moving. He should be calling for his wand, wherever it was but there’d been no time to look for it let alone call for it and stay in one place long enough for it to fly into his fingers. There wasn’t a lot of space in the corridor; he should have gone the other way, and tried to get back around the corner where he’d have protection. But his dodges took him in the other direction and he was now scarcely a couple meters away from Holly.

“Obliviate!”

Jeremy feinted towards the corridor edge and then slid towards Holly avoiding another “Obliviate!” Sometimes moving in close was better than away. Perhaps he could break her concentration.

Suddenly Jeremy felt his body swerve and slam into the opposite wall. Stars swam in front of his eyes. Dimly he heard, “I protects you, Mistress!”

“Obliviate!” The spell missed somehow. Jeremy looked and saw Winky standing between him and Holly, blocking his view of Holly. “I keeps you safe!” Winky said. Winky was facing Holly not Jeremy as she spoke. Then he felt fur brush across his nose. Sasha?

“Oblí—Obli—Obli—” Holly lowered her wand and sank to her knees.

Jeremy breathed a mental sigh of relief. Was it over? He didn’t move sensing it was safer to remain where he was…


“I protects you,” Winky repeated.

“Yes. You protects me.”

Jeremy cautiously got to his knees. “What happened?”

Holly opened her other hand. The broken bits of Richards’ wand fell to the floor. “The kidnapper’s here, among us!” Holly whispered. Jeremy could hear the terror in Holly’s voice. “He could be anyone!”

“Not anyone,” argued Jeremy in disbelief.

“No, just those who practice, ocu, Occulmency. I know the rest.”

“But, you know me,” Jeremy argued. He’d known his Occlumency had bothered Holly, just not how much.

“No, Sasha knows you,” Holly corrected.

“Sasha?”

“Sometimes I forget to wait and see what she says,” Holly continued while looking down at Winky. “Sometimes I forget she’s there to ask…” she confessed. “You came around that corner, a voice with no emotion. I was so afraid I just … acted.”

It was more than just fear, Holly had been beyond reasoning. But Jeremy didn’t argue. It was over now.

**********

“Nice wand,” complimented Pilkington. “How does it work?”

“Like a dream?” answered Anthony Richards proudly. McGonagall had been furious that Anthony had been attacked on school grounds. As soon as he was released from the infirmary, she had personally taken him to Hogsmead to select a new wand. Not only that, McGonagall had used Hogwarts funds to pay for it! The whole school was now on “intruder alert.” No student could travel alone.

In addition, Anthony had called the prefects together and told them to reinstate H2 security measures—curfew, head counts, the works. Grufudd complained but the others didn’t. Anthony was well aware that if Bromadge hadn’t made a head count and gone looking for him, things could
have turned out much differently…

“How is the investigation going…?” questioned Fitzpatrick.

“Well, I gave the list of train riders to McGonagall. She’s giving it to Thomas so his aurors can
double check the whereabouts of each one.”

“Which means absolutely nothing as the kidnapper probably left and made it back home long
before Anthony was even missed,” stated Scorpius disdainfully.

“Assuming the kidnapper even left the grounds,” added Anthony. “Where was Turay?”

“Turay was in her bed when Professor Lovegood checked on the students the night you were
attacked,” reported Pilkington. “She’s been the dorms since after dinner and retired early because she
had a head-ache.”

“Then that clears her!” said Wycliff cheerfully. “She couldn’t have done it!”

“No, it just means she’s got an accomplice,” retorted Scorpius, “or she’s the accomplice. But
we already knew that. And that second person could be hiding anywhere!”

“We thought of that already,” reported Wycliff, “so we checked the Room of Requirement
right after we dropped you off at the Infirmary. It wasn’t in use so I left Winky there polishing the
organ so no one else can repurpose the room.” They were all sitting in the Room of Requirement,
without an organ, so Wycliff had obviously repurposed the room for their meeting. Presumably
she’d leave Winky in the room when they left.

“There’s lots of places to hide in the Forbidden Forest if you don’t mind camping,” suggested
Scorpius.

“I suppose we could ask the Centaurs if they have noticed anyone lurking in the woods
lately,” proposed Wycliff thoughtfully, “but I’m not sure they’d answer. They’re probably still pretty
mad about what you did to them last year…”

“Hey, I didn’t set that fire!” stated Anthony righteously. Of course, he knew who did…

“Not the fire,” retorted Wycliff impatiently, “the water!”

“Oh, well that was definitely not me,” Anthony assured them though he wasn’t exactly sure
what she meant by water… He’d have to make inquiries…

“Perhaps it would be best to get the Headmistress to talk with the Centaurs,” suggested
Pilkington. “We’re not supposed to be in the woods, anyway.”

“True,” agreed Anthony. “I’ll ask her…” He picked up the smoky gray quill that suddenly
materialized on the table next to him and wrote a message to himself on the folder that lay in front.

“Oh, yes,” Anthony reached into the folder and pulled out four pieces of folded parchment paper and
handed them out.

“What’s this?” questioned Fitzpatrick.

“The password to the Prefect’s Bathroom,” explained Anthony. “You’re Advisors and as
important as any prefect; you should have access to there too!”

“Sweet!” said Scorpius happily. “I’ve always wanted to go there. It’s supposed to be pretty
nice!”

“Not alone!” said Anthony sharply.

“What, you think the kidnapper is hiding there!”

“Rules!” Anthony reminded. “We can’t be the ones breaking the rules!” he added piously.

Actually Anthony was less worried of another encounter with the kidnapper than he was of another
one with Moaning Myrtle!

Anthony had never had an actual conversation with a ghost before. All the other ghosts just
went their own way after the first night greetings. Moaning Myrtle was different. After Myrtle had
finished with her complaints about ghostly restrictions, she had moved on to campus bullying, (all
Slytherin according to her) and then started in on questions of a more personal nature—“What did he
think of non-traditional, ghost/mortal, relationships?” “Did he like older women?” Anthony didn’t
know quite how to respond. He was too weak to walk away and he knew offending a ghost could
be disastrous… He was most relieved when Corner and Wycliff finally had returned even though
they hadn’t brought his clothes; Wycliff had to send Winky to get them…

It was strange how no one had ever mentioned Moaning Myrtle in Slytherin comments about
the Prefect’s Bath. Thinking about it, Anthony decided that they, as he, had probably been rather embarrassed by their encounter with Myrtle. It would have been way worse to have met her earlier while he was actually bathing! Anthony gave an involuntary shutter—what if she had been there and just not said anything? He resolved to have a private word of warning with Scorpius about Myrtle.

“Anything else to report?” he asked changing the subject.
“Turay aced her exams,” reported Pilkington.

“Of course she did,” growled Scorpius. “She had time to study and learn that stuff when she wasn’t trying to stay alive!”

Placement testing had ended and while no one had scored particularly high in such subjects as Care of Magical Creatures and Astronomy (totally book learned) they had all done exceptionally well in other subjects including Herbology and Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Anthony argued long and hard with McGonagall that, given the unusual circumstances, the overall scores should be averaged together and students should be awarded additional/replacement credit for the skills they had learned, things not normally taught or in the books, such as making glass and pollinating moths, chilling storage rooms and snitches, spell creation...

No doubt the fact that his scores were among the lowest (not taking time to attend classes himself) helped Anthony argue so vigorously on behalf of everyone else. It was probably also true that the professors were so glad to have the students back that they didn’t fight too much to have missed fall work added to the spring curriculum. (Several Firsts had privately told Anthony that the professors had slipped them some of the answers while testing…)

The end results was that there wouldn’t be any remedial classes or additional work assigned. Anthony proudly informed the others of his part in making that happen.

“She’s a Ravenclaw,” reminded Fitzpatrick. “Turay probably didn’t need to study in the first place.”

“That was probably closer to the truth,” thought Anthony knowing that Turay was asleep the whole time. Of course, she could have spent her holidays studying to catch up…

**********
“No!” whispered Holly. “I can’t do it! I just can’t!” She was hunched over in her chair in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom tugging on her shirt in obvious distress.

“You attacked another student without provocation,” reminded Professor Luna Lovegood in a calm voice, “using a spell not taught at Hogwarts, one that could have caused irreparable damage had it connected.”

The auror students had met the day after the attack on Anthony Richards. They congratulated Jeremy Corner for his swift thinking and actions that undoubtedly saved Richards’ life. Corner then told them what else had occurred in the halls that night… The auror students spent the rest of their time discussing what could be done about it. Holly was nearly an adult. At any place other than Hogwarts, what she had done would surely gain her an instant arrest and a trip to Azkaban. Luna’s meeting with Holly was the result of that discussion.

“It won’t happen again, I swear!” promised Holly with tears streaming down her face.

“That is a promise you cannot keep,” stated Luna calmly, “and we both know it.” The auror students all agreed Holly had had a rough time. Unfortunately, alternate world flashbacks and prior kidnappings were only mitigating factors when it came to sentencing; Holly was still responsible for her actions. An attack, the magnitude of which Jeremy described, could not be overlooked.

“But it was only because I was alone! I won’t be alone any more,” Holly reminded desperately. “The intruder rules…”

“That solution is temporary at best,” Luna told Holly. “Besides, you and your friends should be on the alert for the intruder, they should not also be watching you, keeping the other students safe from you…”

“But it’s only until they find the kidnapper,” Holly assured. “I’ll be fine after that!”

“Until you perceive another threat, real or imagined,” replied Luna. “Your fears are controlling you, Miss Wycliff,” she continued. “You are a danger to the Wizard community until you learn to control your fears. Can you think of something else to try to reverse this?” Holly was fortunate she had so many friends, people willing to step in and help if necessary.

“No,” Holly mumbled. “It’s just that—” she broke off.

“It’ll be fine,” assured Luna. “You’ll be fine. Perhaps even safer than here!” Luna just hoped it would work.

“Yes, ma’am,” Holly whispered desolately.

*********

Anthony Richards and several other Slytherins entered the Great Hall for breakfast.

“Richards!” called out Corner.

Anthony paused while the others continued to their table. Corner was leaned against the wall with Nikita Kakkar (R7) and Alessa Moore (R6). Corner straightened up from against the wall. Moore and Kakkar sauntered away.

“Wycliff won’t be coming to your little meetings for a while,” Corner told Anthony in a low voice.

“Huh? Why? She isn’t hurt or anything is she?” Anthony asked with sudden alarm. She had looked a little “off” after his rescue but fine at their meeting the other day. Perhaps something else had happened he wasn’t aware of… Why hadn’t he been told?

“She’s fine,” assured Corner. “There’s just something she has to work out…”

“What?” demanded Anthony knowing Wycliff’s problems could be lethal in nature…

“Um, you’ll have to ask her about that yourself when she returns,” Corner answered vaguely.

“I will,” promised Anthony. “Uh, so why are you telling me?” he asked realizing it was the first time Corner had taken an open interest in Anthony’s activities.

Corner shrugged. “Figured you’d want to know…” and walked off to the Ravenclaw table…
“I can’t believe you helped my sister buy cyanide pills!” stormed Vernon. He was in his dorm room at Smeltings with Kenny Perkins and Miranda Jones.

“I was only trying to help!” explained Miranda. “She said you were busy….”

“Well, I wasn’t,” denied Vernon. “She just knew I’d never help with something like that! Cyanide!” he exploded. “How could you?!”

“She said it was for a project!” insisted Miranda. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Wrong? WRONG? It’s cyanide! You know, poison!” answered Vernon.

“So?”

“Didn’t the fact it was poison raise a red flag or something? You don’t do “projects” with poison. You should have known!”

“How would I know?” Miranda protested. “You said her school was a little weird….”

Vernon didn’t answer; he just glared at Miranda.

“I didn’t know!” continued Miranda in the silence. “You never said anything! No one said anything!”

That was probably true. Miranda had inquired what had happened about Holly being missing, but got only a vague response about going to school with no teachers. Kenny Perkins had heard more, but then he had been there when Holly had arrived. And then the relatives arrived and the conversation turned to other things.

Vernon took a deep breath. “When Holly talks about death and dying,” he began, “she actually means it! And you just handed her the means!”

Miranda’s eyes opened wide. “You mean suicide?” she questioned, “No! Holly’s not like that! I’d know!”

“Obviously, you don’t!” he snapped. “I gotta take a walk!” Grabbing his coat Vernon stomped out of the room slamming the door behind him.

“I didn’t know!” said Miranda to the door. She looked helplessly at Kenny. “I didn’t know!” she repeated. “Nobody told me….”

Kenny sighed. “Don’t feel too bad,” he told her, “Holly took everybody else’s pills in the house and they didn’t notice! Vernon’s probably mad about that too but he can’t yell at you about that. Can’t yell at Holly either because she’s back in school. But they found the pills and got them before she took any so no harm done….”

Miranda gulped. “Do you suppose I should mention the bag of peach pits she bought?” she asked in an uncertain voice.

“Huh?”

“I mean, she said she wanted to plant an orchard, but peach pits—they contain cyanide…”

“Oh, yeah,” agreed Kenny. “Maybe…”

“And then there were the flowers…”

“The flowers?”

“Yes. She was so pleased when we found them: Oleander, Foxglove, Larkspur, Wolfsbane, Nightshade…”

“Oh, poisonous?”

“Very. But only if you eat them… You don’t really think she’d eat the flowers do you?”

Miranda questioned uncertainly.

Kenny thought about it. “I don’t know Holly too well,” he began. “But I do know she’s had some, uh, difficult times. If Vernon says she’s suicidal, then yes, she probably would.”

“The flowers should be all wilted by now,” informed Miranda. “They’re still toxic when dry but she’s probably tossed them. Holly said she thought they’d look good in her hair if she could get them to last… I told her they used to use arsenic to preserve flowers; she said that took too long…”

Miranda’s voice trailed off no doubt realizing, as did Kenny, that Holly’s comments betrayed a more than casual knowledge of arsenic…

“I’d better go find Vernon,” Miranda abruptly said while reaching for the door.
“Uh, no,” decided Kenny quickly. “It’ll probably make him angrier and I can tell Mr. Potter myself…” He reached into his wallet to pull out that taxi card.


“Well, Mr. Potter, uh, he sort of looks after Holly while she’s at school…”

“Oh. Is he related to Harry Potter, the mass murderer in Wakefield?” Miranda asked in a hopeful voice.

“Um, yeah, sort of,” hedged Kenny.

“How? Is he a brother or something?”

“Um, no,” replied Kenny rather reluctantly. Miranda looked at him expectantly. Finally Kenny added, “He is Harry Potter.”

“The mass murderer in Wakefield?”

“Uh, I don’t think he’s really a mass murderer,” admitted Kenny.

“No?”

“Nor in Wakefield,” Kenny confessed.

“Oh.” Miranda looked rather crestfallen. “All that was a lie?”

“I think so, yeah,” agreed Kenny. “But I don’t think that Marge lady knew it…”

“Oh. So why does she think it?”

“Don’t really know,” answered Kenny thoughtfully. “Didn’t think I should ask; they’re rather touchy about that side of the family.”

“Family?” Miranda’s interest revived. “So they’re related?”

“Harry Potter is Vernon’s second cousin,” Kenny told Miranda. “He’s fairly tall with green eyes like Vernon and Holly and looks rather ordinary…”

“Oh.”

And then, Kenny wasn’t sure why he did it, but Miranda looked so downcast at the news of an ordinary cousin and Vernon really did like her, he added, “Vernon told me he’s a wizard.”

***********

“Turay forgot her permission slip,” volunteered Pilkington when they next met.

It felt strange to hold a meeting without Wycliff. The Room of Requirement wouldn’t work. No doubt Winky was still there. Anthony had to move the meeting to the Annex instead. The Annex, still cold but no longer refrigerated, looked odd without the shelves filled with meticulously sorted food carefully divided by house and name… Scorpius had asked about Wycliff’s absence, but no one gave any real answers. Anthony was glad Corner had alerted him earlier. He was able to inform the group Wycliff was fine and her absence was temporary thing… Anthony had been wondering ever since why Corner had taken the time to alert him; it wasn’t as if they were friends or anything…


“The one to Hogsmeade,” answered Pilkington.

“Oh.” That was possible. That slip should have been handed in at the Fall. It would have been easy enough to forget.

“She got very angry when Professor Lovegood refused to grant her access to Hogsmeade without it,” Pilkington added informatively.

“Yeah, I would be too,” agreed Scorpius aloud. But everyone knew the Professors were strict about not letting anyone go to Hogsmeade without a signed permission slip.

“It’s the first time we’ve ever seen Turay get angry,” Pilkington added. “First time she’s ever forgotten anything…”

***********

“I presume you saw the make-over,” stated Pilkington dryly.
Anthony Richards and the others nodded. Who hadn’t? Turay had stepped proudly in at
dinnertime the previous night sporting a brand new hairstyle—straightened hair that rippled and fell
gracefully onto her shoulders. Her heavy rimmed glasses were gone, as were the tight skinny black
leggings and flats that made her look so thin and spindly. Instead, Turay wore a smart blue suit and
heels and looked as if she stepped right off a Witchen fashion page.

“Turay says she was tired of looking frumpy,” reported Pilkington. “She said she was
wearing one of the latest styles she saw in Paris.”

“A likely story!” thought Anthony derisively considering where she had actually been.

“So she got her permission slip signed?” asked Fitzpatrick.

“She gave a signed slip to Professor Lovegood right after breakfast,” acknowledged
Pilkington. “Except … none of the owls brought her any mail…”

“Huh?” thought Anthony, “what did that mean?”

obviously can’t tell the difference…”

**********
“Are you ready?” asked Daniel Pilkington.
“I suppose,” answered Holly reluctantly. And she rose from her seat from across the kitchen table. Who’d have thought one little witch could be such a challenge…

Once he heard what Holly had done, Mr. Potter had apparently whisked Holly (without Sasha or Winky,) out of Hogwarts and into St Mungo’s for a visit with Healer Winonan. Mr. Potter had also contacted Daniel and requested that he meet them there.

Healer Winonan informed them Holly’s behavior had undoubtedly been P.T.S.D. related (whatever that was) most likely resulting from her experiences with Sir. Hopefully, spending time with a lot of “emotionless” witches and wizards, none of whom were “Sir,” would help Holly overcome her trauma, or at least force her to find other, less destructive ways, to deal with it.

That’s where Daniel came in. Daniel worked at Ministry Headquarters. In addition, Daniel and Terika practiced Occlumency. Mr Potter and his wife Ginny didn’t. Or, rather Mr. Potter did, but Holly could sense it or something. Daniel wasn’t sure how that worked out. Anyway, the bottom line was, could Holly stay with them for a few days while this got worked out? As one of her legal guardians, how could Daniel refuse?

It sounded good in theory. In practice… Well… Holly protested strongly at the prospect of just spending a night with Terika and him, let alone longer. “No offense,” Holly told Daniel, “it not that I don’t trust you, its just that I, uh…”

“Don’t trust me?” filled in Daniel helpfully.
“Yeah,” she admitted. “Not when you’re doing Occlumency.”

But Mr. Potter would not relent. “There’s no one you’d be safer with than Mr. Pilkington,” he told Holly. “And you know that, deep down. Give it a chance!” he encouraged.

“And what if I don’t want to do this, any of it?” she questioned.

“Then I’ll return you to your parents and we’ll set you up to attend the Muggle school of your choice. I won’t force you to do this, Holly,” Mr. Potter added. “But you won’t be able to return to Hogwarts unless you get this all figured out. That choice is not yours to make.”

“Expulsion?” she whispered in a fearful voice.

“No, not expulsion, exactly,” Mr. Potter assured her. “It’s a matter of school safety,” he explained. “Bad enough there’s a kidnapper out there randomly attacking students, but to have to watch out for you there too?” Mr. Potter shook his head. “Personally, I think you’re safer out here than in Hogwarts right now.”

**********

Dinner with Holly was strained. Holly stared warily at Daniel and Terika the whole time. She was fine with Aiden, though. Of course, Aiden was only 9 years old and didn’t practice Occlumency. Aiden had a grand time asking Holly questions. He was full of curiosity and demanded more than “yes/no” answers. Holly wouldn’t speak much of H2 or Hogwarts, but she willingly described the Muggle concerts and balls she attended during the summer in great detail.

After dinner, Aiden showed Holly around the house and kept her occupied with wizard games. Then he encouraged her to pick a room next to his for her bed and suggested she set up whatever wards around the room she wished to feel safe.

Unfortunately, Holly didn’t really know any wards. That was a 7th year subject and not taught at H2; the students had decided that wards would not have much use in a world totally made by the kidnappers. Also, warded areas would make it difficult, if not impossible, to find missing students trapped behind them. So Aiden got Terika to teach Holly a simple ward she could cast that would cause loud bells to ring should someone try to enter the room. Hopefully there would come a time when Holly didn’t feel the need to do such things.
The weekend went rather smoothly, considering. Holly spent most of her time with Aiden. Aiden didn’t usually socialize with girls, or teens, or Leila’s friends, but Holly was an exception. Her presence during the school year was unusual enough and Daniel’s rather vague explanation of why she was there was equally intriguing. Daniel had told his family to “tell anyone that asks that Holly was there to complete an internship with him.” Daniel wouldn’t lie to his family. They would know by the unusual wording that that an internship was not the reason why Holly was there and would also know to not ask Daniel or Holly further assuming it was legal in nature. But that didn’t mean they couldn’t ask other questions and try to figure it out from what Holly said and didn’t say…

Things changed the moment Holly took a dose of PAINLESS Monday morning. It was a potion that blocked or prevented Holly from feeling the emotions of others. She had apparently taken it once before, when Harry Potter had first taken Holly in to see Winonan. The potion wasn’t permanent. With repeated usage, however, Holly would eventually develop a resistance to it. But for now, it would force Holly to deal with the world without relying on her empathic gifts. After a few minutes, Holly turned a several shades paler. Then Daniel asked if she was ready to leave…

Daniel Pilkington rose from his own kitchen seat. Holly followed. Going to the entryway, Daniel paused to put on his coat, robe, a hat, scarf and mittens. It was cold outside. He handed Holly her blue robe (from H2). Terika pulled out an extra scarf and hat and offered them to Holly. Aiden bounced in from the kitchen and said a cheery “Good-bye!” from behind them. Holly visibly started at the sound of his voice dropping the scarf in her hands. This did not bode well.

Daniel opened the front door and the two stepped outside to go to Ministry Headquarters. They reached the curb. It was early, the way Daniel liked it, and the streets were empty, mostly. Daniel pulled out his card to call Stan…

Then a couple of Muggles ran past. Before he realized it, Holly bolted and charged down the street in the opposite direction! Daniel took off after her. Holly veered when she saw more Muggles but didn’t slow. Daniel drew his wand.

“Accio Thread!” he shouted. His hand reached out and grasped a thin blue thread that sped towards him, Daniel wrapped his robe tighter around his body while keeping a tight grip on the thread. Then he made for the nearest bench and sat down. Daniel pulled out a well-worn copy of a Muggle book he had picked off a table labeled “free” and began to read…

Two hours later, rather, one hour fifty-seven minutes, precisely, Daniel Pilkington heard a voice.

“You put a ball of yarn in my pocket?” asked the disbelieving voice. Daniel breathed a silent sigh of relief. “Didn’t want you to get lost,” he answered while keeping his eyes fixed on the book. Interesting book; nothing at all to do with colours or art, as the title A Study in Scarlet, implied, but still very interesting.

“Blue yarn?”

“Ravenclaw colours,” Daniel answered dismissively.

“H2 yarn?”

“Very strong stuff,” admitted Daniel. “And very distinctive,” he added mentally. He hadn’t been able to find anything like it in the Muggle world. “I do hope you wound it up on your return,” he added. “I borrowed it from Leila’s room and I’m sure she’d like it back…”

“Yeah, about that,” drawled Holly while suddenly appearing in front of Daniel. She’d obviously been using a disillusionment charm. Leila had reported that disillusionment charms had been very popular the previous year while trying to avoid the Sytherin harassment. Learning them had been a requirement at H2 where being able to hide might be the only way to escape once the
kidnappers arrived… Scorpius Malfoy had taught some variations that made the charm work even better…

“Do you have any idea the number of weird looks I got while winding it up?” Holly held out a rather large ball of blue yarn, the end of which was in Daniel’s hand.

“And you didn’t even have to be an Empath to know what they were thinking!” replied Daniel cheerfully. “See? You can do this,” he added encouragingly. Daniel let go of the yarn. The end drifted lazily to the ground.

“You could have just followed,” Holly stated bluntly as she finished winding the ball. Daniel marked his place and closed the book. “Kidnappers follow,” he answered succinctly.

“I’m not a kidnapper.” He put the book back in his pocket.

“That was a risky thing you did,” Holly declared. “I could have been hurt.”

“Not likely,” replied Daniel. “You veered away from the other Muggles; you weren’t going to crash into anything. The real danger was to anyone stupid enough to try to stop you.”

“I could have hurt someone!” she protested.

“And you didn’t draw your wand…” finished Daniel as if nothing else Holly might have done would have mattered. “Why did you at Hogwarts?” he asked curiously.

Holly looked down. “No place to run,” she mumbled. “Not really. And Anthony’s wand… Already snapped! The kidnapper had to be there under a disillusionment charm just like Anthony had been. I could just feel him there, waiting… And then Jeremy’s voice came out of nowhere…” Holly looked up at Daniel. “I lost it,” she admitted. “Does it really matter why?”

“No,” agreed Daniel knowing that was what Holly wanted to hear, “Not really.” But it did, especially if Holly didn’t want to repeat what she had done… Daniel stood. “I’m late for work,” he commented. “Good thing I moved all my appointments to the afternoon…”

“You knew I’d run!” accused Holly looking at Daniel with surprise.

“I looked up P.T.S.D.,” admitted Daniel proudly. “Of course you’d run. And I knew I hadn’t a chance to catch up once you started, not without using magic and I wouldn’t do that. I’m not your enemy, Holly,” Daniel added seriously. “Even though I do practice Occlumency.”

“I know,” she whispered. “It’s just that…”

Daniel held out his hand. “I know you can’t feel my emotions,” he stated. “But you can feel my hand…”

Holly looked suspiciously at the hand. “Yeah, that’s what a person taking polyjuice would say to get a hold of me…” she answered.

Daniel rolled his eyes. “And would that person also ask, “Which one of me looks the best?” he asked making a reference to one of Holly’s early visits to his office.

“Probably not,” agreed Holly thoughtfully, “except that kind of stuff can all be easily gotten with a spell or two and the right questions…”

Daniel mentally rolled his eyes again. “So there’s nothing I can do or say that would convince you I’m me?”

“No, not really,” she admitted.

“Then I won’t try,” decided Daniel aloud. “Besides you’ve already made up your mind so we should get on to other topics.”

“I have? What do you mean?”

“You came back,” declared Daniel. “You and I both know you would have never done that had there been the least bit of uncertainty. Trust your instincts, Holly,” Daniel told her. “They won’t fail.”

“And if they do?” she asked uncertainly.

“Then you know some very fine spells to offset that,” he told her confidently. “Now, what do you say we check out the Ministry…”

“Seriously?” questioned Holly in disbelief.

“Seriously.”

“I just lost it and went racing across London and now you suggest I go to the Ministry?”

“Why not?” argued Daniel. “I figure it’ll be easier.”
“What makes you think that?”
“Out here, you have to worry that there may be a dark wizard or witch hiding amongst the Muggles out to get you and in the Ministry, you won’t have to wonder, they’re all witches or wizards, just not all out to get you! I figure that should cut your worries in half!”
“Then the first thing I’ll do is walk you around and show you all the exits,” replied Daniel firmly. “But seriously, it’s rather cold out here and I’m ready for a nice cup of hot tea in a toasty office, or maybe hot cocoa! How about you?”
Holly didn’t answer but wrapped her blue cloak around her body tighter.
“You can do it,” Daniel encouraged confidently. “I’ll have your back the whole time…” he assured. And it was why she was here, but Daniel didn’t say that. Even though this was all “for her own good,” the situation was forced. Daniel wanted to return control as much as possible to Holly. There was a much better chance of success if she willingly cooperated…
“I suppose so,” Holly said uncertainly.
“Terrific!” exclaimed Daniel cheerfully. He whipped out the card and said “Stan? We need you!” before Holly had a chance to object. Daniel had no desire to walk the whole way to the Ministry if he could help it. Surely Holly would know Stan with or without emotions. If she didn’t, well, Stan was Hufflepuff. He would forgive any strangeness that might occur. Successfully managing a ride with Stan would be a major boost to Holly’s confidence… Holly would need it before venturing into the Ministry.

**********
Holly Wycliff apprehensively stepped into the telephone booth that was the Ministry entry with Wizard Pilkington. “You can do this,” she kept telling herself as the elevator descended. “You did it before with Witch Bulstroy.” “Yeah right,” she answered back to her own logic. “At least Witch Bulstroy had emotions you could sense, Slytherin though they were…”
“I recommend you take my arm,” said Wizard Pilkington quietly interrupting Holly’s thoughts. Holly didn’t move; she trusted Wizard Pilkington enough to stand near to him, but beyond that… “Or not,” he said easily. “But it occurs to me that hanging on might guarantee I won’t magically change into someone else when you’re not looking…” Holly still didn’t move. It was an interesting idea, but she didn’t trust him that much…
The elevator stopped and the doors opened. Beyond was a flurry of colourful people—all witches and wizards! Holly would have run, but where? Into the crowd of unknowns? Holly grabbed Wizard Pilkington’s arm. Wizard Pilkington was the only one there whose identity she was fairly certain of. Holly stood frozen in place staring at all the people.
“Half a league, half a league, half a league onward,” murmured Wizard Pilkington interrupting Holly’s spiraling fear.
“Huh, what?” The words sounded familiar. Holly forced her mind to focus on them.
“All in the valley of death rode the six hundred,” continued Wizard Pilkington.
Holly finally recognized the words. She looked up at him in surprise. “Seriously?” she questioned. “How’d you know that?”
“Leila writes and I read,” he answered succinctly. “You never know what will come in handy. Surely this is better than then,” not in reference of the original charge, but of the recent train ride Holly had taken to Hogwarts.
“Not really,” grumbled Holly. “They had emotions…”
“Only some of them,” Wizard Pilkington reminded.
“Would you hurry up?” Holly looked up and saw a younger witch with red hair and matching hat and robes standing in front of them. She looked harmless enough, but hadn’t any emotions! “I’ve an appointment to keep!” the witch said with obvious impatience.
Holly clutched Wizard Pilkington’s arm tighter and scurried out of the elevator taking him with her. The prospect of a line of emotionless witches and wizards looking at her impatiently while
wanting to go the other way was not to her liking.

Once out, though, Holly couldn’t bring herself to move any farther. She two stood next to the elevator while others came in and out. Wizard Pilkington stood reassuringly with her, not attempting to move or free his arm. There were so many witches and wizards, all without reassuring emotions and even more out in the distance beyond. Their presence took Holly’s breath away!

Holly stood partially behind Wizard Pilkington for a long time waiting for, for what? She didn’t know but was certain it was terrible—except nothing happened. Witches and wizards glanced at them as they went about their business. Then one dressed in vibrant blue and gold robes stopped and looked at them. He stepped up to Wizard Pilkington. Holly cautiously drew her wand and hid it behind Wizard Pilkington’s body. “What are you doing?” the Wizard asked curiously.

“Taking a survey,” answered Wizard Pilkington easily. “What’s your favorite colour?”

“Huh?”

“Bertie Bott flavour. What’s your favorite colour?”

“Oh, um green. I’ve always fancied green…”

“Perfect,” said Wizard Pilkington with a pleased sounding voice. “It’s for a client looking for the best place to market a new product,” he added in explanation. “Tedious work, but it pays the bills. And what do you fancy for breakfast?”

“That would be the Three Card Draw,” the wizard answered with a smile.

“Perfect!” said Wizard Pilkington with a smile. “Thank you so much for your time. Did you get all that?” he asked Holly. Holly managed to nod her head while wondering what a “Three Card Draw” was… Wizard Pilkington sounded very convincing. If Holly hadn’t known better, she’d have bought the story. The wizard apparently did and moved on. Holly kept her wand out, just in case.

“What scares you?” questioned Wizard Pilkington in a low voice.

“Huh?”

“Your wand is out and you’re stiff as a board,” he told Holly. “What is it that scares you?”

“No emotions!” Holly answered promptly.

“There were no emotions outside either,” he countered, “and you managed your way about and back without incident. What’s different?”

“Uh… They’re all witches and wizards!”

“As they are at Hogwarts,” Wizard Pilkington reminded. “What’s different?”

“Emotions of course. Not everyone there practices Occlumency!”

“And that makes it different how?”

“Easy. I stayed with my friends and they all have emotions.”

“You avoided the others?”

“Pretty much,” she acknowledged.

“That doesn’t sound very nice, avoiding some of the students…”

“It’s not that many,” Holly answered defensively. “Only some sixes and sevenths and they’re mostly Slytherins; I don’t associate with them anyway.”

“And Mr. Corner? What about him?”

“What about him?”

“Does he practice Occlumency?”

“Yes…” Holly admitted reluctantly.

“And you avoided him?”

“I tried to, but I can’t always. He’s an a—Head Boy after all.”

“And that night?”

“Jeremy asked for my help, and well, Sasha likes him so I figured it was really Jeremy talking. I didn’t think there were any kidnappers at Hogwarts or wouldn’t have gone alone with him,” Holly continued in a rush. “I know better now,” she added. “It won’t happen again,” she promised. “I tried to tell all that to Professor Lovegood but she wouldn’t listen…”

“You shouldn’t have to depend upon Sasha for your decisions,” Daniel told Holly mildly.

“Yes, sir,” she answered meekly.
More and more people passed by; others paused to speak to Wizard Pilkington who promptly asked survey questions, but nothing earth-shattering happened—no attacks, no kidnapping attempts, nothing. Gradually the rapid beating of her heart slowed to a more normal rate in keeping with her inactivity. Then other matters came to the front. Holly stirred uncomfortably. “Um, don’t you have someplace to go?” she asked hesitantly.

“When you’re ready,” answered Wizard Pilkington easily. He didn’t seem inclined to move anywhere.

Holly fidgeted some more. Finally she broke down and spoke again in a whisper. “Um, I’ve got to go to … the loo?”

“No problem,” said Wizard Pilkington briskly. “This way.” He started moving forward. Holly kept up with him, not letting go of his arm. “Is it, ah, urgent?” he asked as they walked.

“Um, kind of,” Holly confessed.

“Then we’d best move quickly,” Wizard Pilkington started moving faster threading his way through the crowds taking Holly with him. “We still have to go through wand inspection…”

Afterwards, Wizard Pilkington gave Holly a tour of the Ministry from top to bottom showing her every exit he knew of. “The Ministry’s pretty big,” he told her. “Lots of places for you to run,” he assured, “but I don’t want you getting lost…” It was difficult for Holly to keep track of the maze that was the Ministry, especially with all the emotionless witches and wizards wandering about too, but Wizard Pilkington assured her she wasn’t alone in her confusion and she’d figure it all out eventually. He even showed her where the wall maps were located for future reference should she run into difficulties.

Half way through the tour, Wizard Pilkington took Holly to the cafeteria for a bite to eat. She wasn’t really hungry, but Wizard Pilkington said he was. Holly welcomed the chance to sit down with her back to a wall, even though the place was full of emotionless people. Then Wizard Pilkington finished his tour and took Holly to his office where he asked her to sign a series of confidentially papers related to his work as a solicitor before declaring it was time to go home.

Thoroughly exhausted by then, both physically and mentally, the multitudes of leaving witches and wizards at the same time didn’t distress Holly nearly as much as she expected. And the familiarity of wizard Pilkington’s home with his wife and Aiden, emotionless though they were, was a welcome relief.
“Are you ready to leave?” asked Manasa Basu as she put her heavy green winter robe over her shoulders and slipped the hood over her head.

“Yes, Memsahib Basu,” answered Oliver Febland (H1) while doing the same with his heavy blue robe. It came from H2. Febland maintained it was warmer than the regular school robes.

The Slytherin students reverted to their original snooty attitudes once they arrived at Hogwarts stopping just short of open disrespect, as Manasa was the prefect, except for the Firsts. Only they remembered what Manasa had done for them all and truly respected her. When the order came out that no one could travel alone, Manasa had selected three of her brighter Firsts (Onella Jha (R, Geoffrey Bromadge (S,) and Oliver Febland,) as her personal Assistants and used them for after-class traveling companions when necessary. And she did need the assistants.

Surprisingly, Professor Longbottom recognized Manasa’s genius and immediately moved her up into N.E.W.T. Herbology level. Not only that, he brought in several Witches and Wizards noted in the Herbology field to observe Manasa’s work. They were so impressed that they immediately arranged for her to tour Great Britain and give speeches and demonstrations on plant production. It seemed that home grown food—from “seed to feed” was all the rage right now and Manasa’s knowledge and abilities were in great demand. Professor Longbottom was even encouraging Manasa to write a book… He didn’t even want a cut of the profits! It was a marvelous opportunity! But it was also a lot of work replicating what she had done, creating a mini garden, designing visual displays, writing, editing… Manasa’s Assistants were kept very busy.

Manasa drew her wand. “Homonum Revelio!” she shouted waiving her wand around the greenhouse. No response. That was good. They had been working steadily with the fertilizer to produce fast growing plants from seed. The greenhouse had been empty when they began and Manasa had not noticed anyone entering, but it never hurt to be certain. She took the intruder alert seriously.

Manasa opened the door. Febland stepped out first. “Check the outside for intruders,” she instructed Febland. He was working on his intruder detection spells. Manasa wanted never again be caught unawares outside.

“Homonum Revelio!” came Febland’s voice.

Manasa drew out a silver key attached to a chain around her neck. “Anything?” she asked as she carefully locked the door.

“Yes, Memsahib!” he answered. “Over there!”

Not good. It was late and no one should be outside at this hour. Also, the direction Febland indicated was between the Greenhouses and Hagrid’s hut. It was a tangled mass of trees and brush. There were no established paths in that area. Of course, Febland was still learning the spell; he could have done something wrong… “Homonum Revelio!” Manasa shouted and moved her wand about carefully ending in the direction Febland had indicated. Sure enough, the tip of her wand lit up. There was definitely someone out there.

“Hello?” she called out. “Who’s there?” No response.

What to do... While the directions were clear to be on the alert for intruders. There were no instructions on what to do if you actually found an intruder. Manasa could just walk away and report it, but she was a prefect; prefects were expected to do more.

“I’m going to check it out,” she told Febland. “Stay here.”

“No, Memsahib! I’m gong with you!” he said determinedly. Manasa looked at him with surprise. He was only a Hufflepuff, after all. “Rules!” he added as an explanation.

“Very well,” Manasa said aloud. Interesting. An insistence to follow the rules could make even the most timid attempt boldness. “Light your wand.”

“Lumos!” shouted Febland proudly. The tip of his wand lit up brightly.

“Very good,” murmured Manasa approvingly. *Lumos* was not a spell normally taught to
Firsts, but Manasa insisted all her “assistants” learn it. She had to do much of her work after class when it was dark outside. It pleased her to have her assistants “light” the way when she returned from her work. Manasa surveyed the ground in front of her. There was about 6 centimeters of snow on the ground—all unbroken with no visible tracks. The sky was dark and starless. Huge flakes of snow fell quietly. “Homonum Revelio!” she shouted and again pointed her wand where the intruder had been. Again, her wand glowed. Same place. Surely an intruder would have left by now… Perhaps it wasn’t an intruder but someone injured or immobilized, like Richards had been…

“Stay near,” Manasa instructed and, while keeping her glowing wand pointed towards the intruder, she took a step off the trail. Her foot sank a couple of centimeters through the soft newfallen snow and then broke through the crust covering the older snow. Crunch! Febland followed, huddled so close he was almost bumping into her. Crunch, crunch. Nearer and nearer they drew and still the person did not move… Crunch, crunch. Manasa cancelled her Homonum Revelio spell. She had the direction and it was clear no one was moving, if that was even possible. Manasa was fairly certain this was a trap of some sort and she wanted to be ready with her wand.

Crunch cra—! Manasa heard the “crack,” felt the ground give beneath her feet, but it was too late—she was already falling before she could do anything about it! As she fell, Manasa heard “Expellariamus!” Her wand slid from her fingers and then, nothing.

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Darkness. Darkness and pain. Manasa Basu stared blankly into the darkness with confusion. Where was she? What had happened? Abruptly the memories came back in a flood; the intruder, the snow—she had fallen!

Without moving, Manasa sorted out what she was feeling. Headache, sharp stabbing pain and weight on her back making it difficult to move or breathe, cold, ever so cold. Manasa cautiously tried to lift her finger. It moved! A wave of relief flooded through her. That meant there was no Petrificus Totalus spell; she could get out of this, wherever it was! Manasa moved slowly, exploring her surroundings. She found a cold hard surface beneath her. Her head, arms and knees were jammed in awkward angles against a hard cold wall. She shifted an arm and pushed against the floor in an effort to move the weight on her back. It didn’t budge.

Manasa reached behind her to better feel the obstruction. A shoe! Foot! Attached to an ankle! “Febland!” she realized with shock. An unmoving Febland! It had to be the “Petrificus Totalus” spell! “It’ll be OK,” Manasa reassured Febland aloud knowing he had to be very scared. She had been—more than she would ever admit aloud; the fear she’d never be found and left to die of starvation behind the fertilizer bags. But that wouldn’t be a problem this time… Manasa inched her arm down below her knee to a slit cut in the side of her salwar. Her fingers found the wand strapped to her leg…

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Manasa’s parents had not wanted her to return. Manasa was of the same opinion.

Then Anthony Richards and his sister-in-law Mrs. Paige Crowley came to visit. It was unheard of for Hogwarts officials to make personal visits like that. Richards proudly wore an emerald green suit beneath his purple robe with the Headmistress’ Assistant badge. Crowley wore a pale green sleeveless gown with a dark green train attached to her shoulders. A rosemary corsage was attached to her left wrist and a matching dark green scarf was draped artfully around her neck fastened in place with a bronze celtic knot brooch. Her waist-long black hair hung neatly on one side held in place by a narrow gold band that spiraled around and around.

Richards personally asked Manasa to join the others on the train. “I need you along,” he
told her. “You’re the prefect! How would it look if you did not return?”

“I’m prefect only at H2,” reminded Manasa coolly.

“No, at Hogwarts too!” promised Richards. “I guarantee it! But if you don’t return, then

McGonagall will be free to select someone else, someone less qualified. And everyone will talk

about why you wouldn’t return; they’ll question your qualifications and whether you should have been a prefect in the first place…”

Compelling arguments, but did it matter what the Brits thought? Then Mrs. Crowley asked to speak with Manasa privately.

Manasa had never spoken with Crowley before and this visit was their first meeting, but she’d heard stories. Crowley was a bit of a celebrity among the Slytherins. Scarcely two years out of Hogwarts Crowley had already twice escaped imprisonment in Azkaban (the assault of Wycliff and the death of Wizard Ercwliff) and won a court case sending her aunt to Azkaban. Crowley may have won the potions contest but her skill as a potions mixer was reputed to be questionable, yet the Ministry didn’t shut down her potions store. All of that suggested considerable influence behind the scenes at the Ministry. It was even rumoured that both Thomas and the famous Harry Potter had attended her wedding. Crowley was definitely someone to cultivate…

“I’ve a gift for you,” began Crowley in a soft voice. “A token of appreciation for all you
did in saving the students at H2, for saving a beloved, valued member of our family,” she added while handing Manasa a small green box. “Something you may find of use…”

Manasa opened the box. Inside was what looked to be a wide green and gold bracelet.

Upon closer examination, Manasa realized the bracelet was actually a flattened coiled snakeskin complete with tail and head. Manasa recognized the pattern on the snakeskin: green pit viper! Nice enough, but nothing she’d ever wear; she preferred gold bangles. Manasa politely reached in and picked up the bracelet. It immediately uncurled, slithered up her hand and wound around her wrist and arm!

Crowley reached out and stroked the back of the skin. The snakeskin immediately quit moving but remained securely around her arm.

“Is it real?” questioned Manasa curiously while staring at the flattened snake.

“I found it stuffed in a dusty Muggle museum drawer,” answered Crowley with disdain.

“I doubt they’ll even miss it.” She reached out and placed her fingers on the sides of triangular shaped jaws of the head. The viper immediately raised its head and opened its mouth revealing needle-like fangs. “I added the venom sacks,” Crowley informed Manasa, “but they’re filled with a five hour sleep potion. It’ll bite anything within reach if you let go. Squeeze the jaws again…” she added calmly. Her fingers tightened against the jaws and the head again flattened.

With a single finger Crowley lightly stroked the back of the snakeskin. The snakeskin immediately began to wind further up Manasa’s arm. “The strap is very useful keeping things in place,” she added softly as she again stroked the back of the snakeskin. The snakeskin froze in place. Snug, but not too snug. “Quills … knives … daggers …” Crowley continued in a hypnotic voice, “… wands…” As she spoke, Crowley’s right hand took hold of the green gown

she wore and lifted the fabric. Manasa’s eyes widened as she saw a matching green strap that she recognized as a boomslang snakeskin (shredded boomslang skin being a potion ingredient…) wound around Crowley’s leg. Underneath the strap was a wand, a second wand...
With a bit of effort, Manasa’s fingers grasped and slid her second wand from beneath the strap and drew it out for use. “Lumos!” she said. Her wand immediately lit up lighting the area around her. They were in a small black round hole perhaps a meter in diameter. Febland stood on top of Manasa’s back. She twisted so he stood more on her side than her back. Then Manasa extinguished her light. “Finite Incantatem!” she said aiming her wand at Febland. Febland’s body sort of shuttered. Feet slid down to the ground, knees and hands landed on top of Manasa. “Ow!” she said involuntarily.

“Oh, sorry Memsahib!” Febland said quickly and he scrambled up and away from Manasa succeeding in twisting her injured arm and knees in the process.

“Lumos!” Manasa said again. The enclosure lit up. Febland was mashed up against the opposite side.

“Oh, Memsahib!” he exclaimed. “You saved us! You saved us!” He fell upon Manasa and clutched her in something resembling a hug. “I was so scared!”

“Mmmm.” Manasa managed to contain the pain she felt and not take offense by his impromptu actions. Hugs were not her thing. “We’re not out yet,” she reminded.

“Oh, but we will be!” he assured her. “Th-the kidnapper! He kept on shouting Pat—Pat—”

“Petrificus Totalus,” murmured Manasa.

“Yes, that’s it,” said Febland, “and I thought he surely got you too!”

“As did the kidnapper,” agreed Manasa thankful that Febland’s body had obviously blocked the spell.

“And then he put something on top of us…” Febland raised his head and looked up. Manasa did too. There were several boards overhead covering the hole. She gave an involuntary shiver.

“They’d have never found us!” Febland moaned while looking at the boards. “Oh, thank you, Memsahib, Thank you!”

“Wycliff would have found us,” assured Manasa dryly. It was a good thing he’d come along. Manasa practiced Occlumency, but Febland didn’t.

“Oh, no, Mensahib,” corrected Febland. “Holly’s not here. She’s at the Ministry! They’d have never found us!”

“She is?” questioned Manasa curiously. “Why?”

“Um, she just is!” mumbled Febland. “How do we get out?” he questioned quickly obviously trying to change the subject.

In response, Manasa extinguished her light and shouted “Diffendo!” while aiming her wand at the ceiling. The wood shattered. Rock and dirt rained down on them, but also cold air flooded in. Manasa was sure her efforts had broken through to the outside. “Periculum!” she shouted while again aiming her wand overhead. A shower of sparks shot up, through the hole and exploded in the air.

“Over there!” she heard a familiar voice shout. Soon the sky grew light and two heads (and two lit wands) poked over the edge of the hole, Richards and Malfoy.

“Over here!” Richards called out. “We’ve got them both!”

“You OK?” asked Richards with concern. Two more heads (and lit wands) appeared as he spoke, Corner and Woods.

“We’re fine!” said Febland excitedly. “Get us out of here!”


“Wingardium Leviosa!” shouted Richards.

Manasa felt herself rising into the air. It was a curious sensation. Woods and Malfoy lowered her onto the snow.

“Did you see who did it?” asked Corner.

“No!” answered Febland, “but Memsahib saved us!” he told the others. “I thought we were lost, that the kidnapper had buried us and taken our wands but he didn’t! And she saved us!”
Corner looked sharply at Manasa and the wand she held. She was certain he realized it was a different wand. What would he say? “Uh, Febland,” he began, “as the kidnapper is still out there, I suggest you not tell anyone the details of how you escaped. Let’s just say we, uh,”

“Saw a depression in the snow,” filled in Richards, “and checked it out.” It was clear he also realized it wasn’t the same wand. More important, they had decided to make sure no one else knew Manasa carried a second wand.


“Yes,” Febland said in an uncertain sounding voice.

“I’ll explain later,” she assured Febland, “but right now, let’s get you and Basu to the Infirmary...”

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“How do you know you’re alone?” whispered Holly fearfully.

“Huh?” questioned Wizard Daniel Pilkington in surprise. He and Holly were walking down one of the many halls of the Ministry delivering paperwork. It could be done by paper airplane, but paper airplanes could be collected by anyone and Daniel preferred insuring the intended person got his paperwork.

“Really alone?”

Daniel looked down at Holly and noted her anxious glance around the empty corridor. He promptly drew his wand. “Homenum Revelio!” he shouted pointing it about the hall. No response. “We’re alone,” Daniel confirmed as he put his wand away. It was bad form to traverse the Ministry with a wand out as if seeking action.

“But you entered the hall without doing that first,” Holly pointed out. “How can you just—” Holly broke off; she looked positively miserable.

Daniel remembered students at Hogwarts were currently required to travel in groups and check all corridors for unseen intruders. Hogwarts had had problems with unseen intruders before, with Umbridge. “I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “But we’re not on any kind of an alert here and there’s no reason to expect trouble...” Daniel’s voice trailed off. None of that would matter to Holly. Part of her problem was acute paranoia. Past experiences with Sir and Umbridge had given Holly good reason for that paranoia. Unfortunately, checking for the “unseen” at every corner only served to reinforce that paranoia. There had to be a better solution...

**********

“Professor Slughorn gave Turay five house points yesterday for getting the correct answer,” announced Pilkington at one of their meetings.

“So,” answered Scorpius scornfully. “She’s just trying to get into one of Professor Slughorn’s parties.” Professor Slughorn gave parties every year to promising students. Last year they had been held exclusively for Slytherin students. It was rumoured Slughorn intended to open his parties up to students from other houses this year. “At least that’s what Ivy says...” Ivy had taken a distinctive dislike to Turay after her make-over, more than last year, if possible...

“Why would she ever want to attend one of Slughorn’s parties?” asked Fitzpatrick scornfully. “They’re eminently more interesting than comic books!” retorted Scorpius with equal scorn. Anthony and Scorpius had been regular guests at Slughorn’s parties the previous year; they’d been a great place to make plans against the other students.

“Students get house points all the time,” interrupted Anthony before a fight could erupt between the two. “Why have you mentioned it?”

“Not Turay,” informed Pilkington. “She’s never raised her hand for anything...”

“Nothing?” asked Anthony in disbelief. “What if a professor calls on her?”

“She answers correctly, of course,” replied Pilkington calmly. “But she’s never volunteered anything, until now...”
Chapter 36

A loud knock sounded at the door. “Could you get that please,” asked Wizard Pilkington politely.

Holly Wycliff nodded. She rose from her seat and walked to the office door. A week ago she’d have never been able to do this, would have never considered doing it. But things change.

**********

While not comfortable around emotionless people, Holly no longer felt paralyzed with terror by their presence. She was able control her fears while looking for other clues (mostly visual and auditory) to a person’s identity and/or intention when confronted by an emotionless person. Wizard Pilkington had put Holly to work interviewing emotionless witches and wizards one-on-one forcing her to interact with and get to know the kind of people that worried her most. Then he sent her on errands about the Ministry—alone!

“I can’t do this!” whispered Holly to Wizard Pilkington. “Of course you can,” he assured her. “You know the way.” “But … alone!” “Freedom!” whispered Wizard Pilkington seductively. “The ability to go where you wish without having to wait for someone to go with you. To skip and sing and dance without witnesses, if that is what you wish. You’ve been safe, Holly, but not free.” He paused and then continued. “You have jailors and guards instead of friends,” he told her.

“They’re not jai—“
“...They smother you with worry,” he continued over her protests. “That will only stop when you demonstrate their fears are not justified. If you can do this, then you set not only yourself, but your friends free…”

So Holly ventured down the corridors. “Oh, and Holly,” called out Wizard Pilkington as she left. “If you get scared, no Obliviate!”

“Why?”
“Messy paperwork,” he replied succinctly. “Also, it’s hard to prove someone was “after” you if he can’t remember what he just did…”

It was ever so scary at first. But Holly forced herself to continue. And nothing happened! So Holly went again and again…

Holly opened the door of Wizard Pilkington’s office. On the other side stood Paige Crowley. “Welcome!” stated Wizard Pilkington cheerfully. “Won’t you come in?” he invited. “You remember Miss Wycliff,” he continued as Holly stepped away from the door. “She’s working with me on a very special project,” Wizard Pilkington added as Paige stepped gracefully into the office and stared imperiously at the Wizard. Her long black hair was braided and coiled high on her head, held in place by a thin twisting gold snake with glittering green eyes.

“Let me get your robes,” offered Holly. Wizard Pilkington stressed courtesy and comfort for all his clients. Paige raised a hand with a rosemary wrist corsage and unfastened her hunter green robe. She wore a fitted dark green vest over a lime green long sleeved blouse and a matching dark
green calf length a-line skirt covered the tops of her knee-high black boots. A lighter green (matching tones) scarf was draped artfully around her neck and pinned by a bronze broach.

“And how are you today?” he asked pleasantly. Paige didn’t answer but that didn’t seem to bother Wizard Pilkington. “I’ve the paperwork all done,” he continued while pulling out a thick scroll tied with blue ribbon. “It’s ready to be signed. Miss Wycliff,” the Wizard continued, “could you take these papers,” (he handed Holly the scroll) “and Mrs. Crowley down to the Department of International Magical Cooperation? Mr. Richards is hoping to expand his business overseas,” he added by explanation to Holly, “and these papers need to be signed in front of witnesses in their office...”

“Yes, sir,” said Holly. She placed the scroll in her black and yellow extendable bag and slung the bag over her shoulder. That kept Paige’s business private insuring no one would know the purpose they walked through the corridors. “If you will follow me,” Holly added to Paige. Holly stepped outside the office and into the corridor. Paige silently followed.

**********

“Have you been to the Department of International Magical Cooperation before?” asked Holly Wycliff as they walked.

No answer.

“I only ask because it’s a rather long hike from Wizard Pilkington’s office,” Holly explained, “and I was wondering if you knew a shorter route...” Everywhere from Wizard Pilkington’s office was a long hike. Holly secretly wondered if he managed to set things up that way just to force Holly to walk more of the Ministry Halls...

No answer.

Holly mentally sighed and turned the corridor. Paige followed. Paige was scary and intimidating when she used the silent treatment during consultations. Her persistent silence no longer bothered Holly—so much. But that was during consultations and if imperious silence was how Paige wanted to manage them, well, that was her business. Persistent silence the rest of the day was plain rude. Of course, perhaps she didn’t know a shorter way to the Department of International Magical Cooperation. In which case Paige might not have seen the need to respond. The silence was still rude.

The corridor opened up and Holly braced herself for all the other emotionless witches and wizards she knew would be moving purposefully about each intent on his or her own business... Holly forced herself to keep moving while keeping a wary eye on all the other people, watching for anyone who happened to veer in her direction or behave in some suspicious manner.

That wasn’t always a bad thing. Holly had been unable to dodge fast enough the day Wizard Flint recognized her. He greeted Holly with such enthusiasm and excitement that Holly thought her hand would fall off for sure before he’d stop shaking it! Then Flint insisted on introducing Holly to all his friends within the Ministry... And wouldn’t take a “no,” for the subsequent luncheon invitation... Holly thought she’d never see the day when she actually welcomed Wizard Flint’s company anywhere, but with his emotions so easy to read in every expression and movement, a lunch with Flint had been a welcome respite indeed!

Holly turned down a narrower corridor and the multitudes of wizards and witches thinned to a more comfortable number. There could be another reason why Paige wasn’t speaking, one Holly would rather not dwell upon; it was hard not to without some conversation to distract her... While polyjuice could change a person’s appearance, it did not change a person’s voice... The person walking besides her had once not been Paige; the possibility it was not Paige again was all too real... Holly knew Sir had traded escape from Azkaban for information from Witch Umbridge. Though Sir was not a threat, Witch Umbridge was still free. Surely Witch Umbridge had no reason to bother Holly now that the key had been returned to Ariana; surely she had no reason to impersonate Paige again... But not everyone acted logically.

“If Richards is planning to open a branch overseas, will you be too?” questioned Holly. Her
words filled the empty air between them and a response would calm Holly’s growing fears about the silence. But scarcely had she spoken when Holly realized she had made a big blunder. Time and again Wizard Pilkington had cautioned against asking questions related to the work he did. Setting up a new business clearly fell in that category… Paige was certainly within her rights to not answer.

Even so, Holly heard a whispered “no.” A response was good, but not in a whisper. Anyone could whisper and they all sounded pretty much the same… “Where do you—” Holly broke off. Strike that, also business related. What could she ask that wasn’t? They turned down a new the corridor. It was narrow and empty of other witches and wizards. Holly hated empty corridors but refused the impulse to cast a Homonum Revelio spell in general principles. She was with Paige after all, what could be safer? Then again…

“Are you pregnant!” Holly blurted. Holly sensed rather than saw Paige stop. Holly stopped too. She could feel her face warm with embarrassment. The question was definitely not business related, however, it was exceedingly personal instead. “I mean, do you plan to raise a family?” Holly blundered trying to backtrack. Paige looked at her with icy disdain. “I’m sorry,” mumbled Holly, “it’s just that I don’t know, you’ve got me so rattled so that…” Holly gulped. Those black eyes of Paige seemed to pierce through her. “Lookit!” she tried again. “Where were we the last time we talked?” It wasn’t personal, not business related and an answer, correct or not, would settle all Holly’s concerns. Paige would surely recognize why Holly asked and answer as she had done in previous times. That’s when Holly saw the flicker of confusion flash across Paige’s eyes…

“Nooooooooo!” Holly thought with sudden panic.

“Petrificus Totalus” shouted Holly who had let go of the imposter and drawn her wand as soon as the imposter landed on the floor. That was the one spell that guaranteed the person in front of her could not attack. True, the spell didn’t seem to affect Sir, but “Mr. Henderson” was still in St. Mungos stacking blocks. (Holly had checked to make sure when she was at St. Mungos. In addition, Sir had a hospital tracking spell so Holly would have known at once had he left the hospital.) The familiar eucalyptus scent from her wand filled Holly’s nostrils as the imposter immediately stiffened like a log.

And, because Holly had learned that empty looking corridors made her as nervous as those filled with emotionless witches and wizards, she reached into her pocket, pulled out a Weasley Party Popper and threw it at the nearest wall.

It wasn’t the usual Weasley Party Popper, the kind that provided some sort of loud sound followed by a spray of glittery fireflies or perhaps a paper snake coming out of the container. Once Holly convinced herself Wizard Pilkington was indeed Wizard Pilkington, she and he had held a lot of conversations about what worried her most and what could be done to address her concerns. The Weasley Party Popper was one of those measures. Wizard Pilkington had taken Holly for a stroll down Diagon Alley, in particular, Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. George Weasley was happy to help. The Weasley Party Popper could be customized to fit individual preferences and made to explode all sorts of things from paper butterflies that fluttered about afterwards to insects and snakes to crawl and slither on the floor.

The ones Mr. Weasley made for Holly started with loud bang and a flash of light followed by a cacophony of loud animal sounds: elephant trumpets, lion roars, wolf howls, howler monkeys, kakapo parrot squawks, Hippopotamus, finishing with hyena giggles, It was veritable zoo of loud noises designed to last 5 minutes—something Holly was expecting but no hidden assailant would!
Instead of confetti or butterflies, a spray of white bubbly froth spewed out at the same time and swirled around the hall like a white tornado. The area was literally sprayed with white flecks while the noise continued. Holly was expecting the froth too. She peered through the swirl looking for movement. What was that? A huge speckled shape moving contrary to the swirl! And another!

“NOooooool!” The corridor looked empty but wasn’t! “Petrificus Totalus” screamed Holly again and again aiming her wand at the moving shapes. Her words couldn’t be heard over all the animal sounds but her wand aimed true and Holly saw the shapes seem to straighten and tip over. More eucalyptus scent filled the hall.

Suddenly Holly’s wand slid from her grasp and flew into the air! What? Holly wheeled around and saw one more moving blob of white within the swirl. In a single motion Holly drew the wand from her leg and screamed, “Petrificus Totalus” while aiming the wand at the blob. The blob stiffened and toppled.

The noise and tornado ended. The silence afterwards seemed deafening. But Holly knew to expect that as well. She surveyed the corridor for more movement. Seeing nothing, Holly aimed her wand and shouted, "Homunum Revelio!" She had to be certain. Her wand lit up indicating those she had already struck down but no more. Satisfied, Holly held out her hand and shouted “Accio wand!”

The rainbow eucalyptus wand flew towards her and Holly’s fingers curled around the handle welcoming its return. She then returned her first wand back to the holder strapped to her leg and turned her attention to the imposter. Flecks of white stuck to the imposter’s sleek black hair and marred the usual flawless complexion.

Holly searched her. She removed the wand she found and tucked it into her belt. Then Holly reached into her bag and pulled out a roll of duct tape. Vernon kept himself busy all during the holidays repairing and “cleaning up” computers. Several came in covered with a fair amount of duct tape. “Strong stuff,” he told Holly approvingly, “when you don’t have the money to get a new computer and nothing’s wrong but the outside…” So, besides Diagon Alley, Holly insisted Stan take them to a Muggle Hardware store and Holly added a roll of plain silver duct tape to her bag, just in case...

Someone should have heard all the noise and come running to investigate, but that didn’t happen. Holly refused to think what that could mean while she rolled tape around the imposter’s legs and wound more around her arms and body taking pains to insure the wrists and hands were covered in tape too. When she was satisfied the imposter would not be able to get free Holly leaned back and aimed her wand. “Finite Incantatem!” The imposter’s body immediately went limp. She struggled briefly but the tape held her in place. “Where’s Paige?” Holly demanded aiming her wand at the imposter. The imposter blinked back at Holly wordlessly. “I know you’re not Paige,” Holly continued. “It’s an easy enough question and you wouldn’t have hesitated to answer it if you were Paige. So, where’s Paige?”

Abruptly the imperious look relaxed. “If I had to guess,” began a familiar sounding voice, but one that was not Paige, “she’s one of the people you deafened, flattened and covered with,” her tongue stretched out and licked one of the flecks that stuck to her lip, “marshmallow crème? You sprayed us with marshmallow crème!!?”

“Ravendra?” asked Holly in a quavery voice. The imposter’s voice was so very familiar, but attaching it to Paige’s body was so… wrong! “Is that you?”

“I will be as soon as this polyjuice wears off,” answered the person that looked so much like Paige. “Actually, I guess I still am no matter who I look like… But—marshmallow crème? Where did you get that idea?”

“Mr. Weasley,” answered Holly promptly. “He said the stuff fairly glows in the dark, is harmless, but beastly to clean up afterwards—in other words, hard to hide if you got spattered by it! Why are you looking like Paige?”

“I think you know that already,” answered Ravendra/Paige while attempting to sit up.

“It’s a test of some sort?” guessed Holly.

“Couldn’t turn you loose at Hogwarts without making sure you didn’t do something you shouldn’t; couldn’t risk you hurting someone unexpectedly,” she agreed. “Uh, do you think you...
could get this off?” Ravendra/Paige asked shaking her shoulders and struggling to sit up.

Holly leaned back. “I could,” she answered thoughtfully, “but I won’t. Not until after the polyjuice wears off… It’s not that I don’t think you are who you say you are, you sound right, but you certainly don’t look it and…”

“You want to make sure…” finished Ravindra/Paige. “How about asking me something I should know?”

“That’s easy! Where were we the last time we talked?”

“Seriously?” asked Ravendra’s voice while all the right inflections and a look of surprise crossed “Paige’s” features. “But that’s what you—”

“Asked before?” filled in Holly. “Yes. The same question goes for you too. It’s not like we see each other at Hogwarts any more…” Holly reminded. “If you’re really Ravindra, you’ll know the answer.”

“That’s easy. St Mungos. I’m an intern there and you’re always going to St. Mungos for some medical reason… Though if I recall right, I believe we were discussing someone else’s health the last time…”

Holly smiled. “We were,” she agreed. She pulled a small knife out of her bag (courtesy Vernon for when she went back to Hogwarts,) but then stopped.

“Follow-up!” Wizard Pilkington had been drilling into Holly. “If you think a person is lying or if you have any reason to be unsure, ask follow-up questions to be certain…”

“But what kind?” questioned Holly worriedly.

“One that appears to help but entraps instead…”

“Did my diagnosis help?” questioned Holly aloud. “I never did find out…” Ravendra/Paige frowned. “It wasn’t that kind of a discussion,” she answered slowly. “Are you sure I shouldn’t be asking who we gave your medical information to after I gave you your physical?”

Holly smiled. “You didn’t,” she answered, “because I’m not sick!” “Sick with worry,” corrected Ravendra/Paige, “about a little … cut … you got at the bank…” “Which turned out to be absolutely nothing to worry about,” assured Holly firmly and she cut the duct tape that secured Ravindra’s arms.

Ravindra stretched out her arms in relief. “Don’t you think you should have checked on the others before questioning me?” she asked indicating the stiffened bodies covered with white blobs of marshmallow crème.

Holly shrugged. “Bird in hand,” she said briefly. “Who better to know what had happened to Paige than you?”

“But, they’re armed!” protested Ravindra.

“True,” Holly agreed, “but there’s not a lot of spells you can cast without some sort of wand action even if you can say silent spells and then the wand has to be pointed in the right direction…”

“True,” agreed Ravindra, “except Paige and Matthew were following along to make sure no one got hurt; I don’t know who that third person is…”

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“I’m not sure I like you conducting Hogwarts business at the Ministry,” stated Wizard Dean Thomas, head of Magical Law Enforcement.

“Better Hogwarts business now than Ministry business later,” replied Luna Lovegood serenely. They were standing outside a corridor watching the clean-up efforts of Holly Wycliff and aurors Vasari, Crowley and Kirkland. Mostly it was Wycliff, Vasari, and Kirkland. Once released from the “Petrificus Totalus” spell, Crowley had gracefully risen, managing to look dignified despite the white blotches that covered her body, cleaned herself up immediately and the helpfully pointed out places the others had missed. Holly’s cleaning spells were not nearly as effective as her other
spells. She had gotten most of the sticky goo off Dean, but he couldn’t wait to get home to take a proper bath.

“I’m so sorry,” said Holly apologetically over and over again when she discovered the identity of the third person she had frozen with her spell. “I didn’t mean to! But I thought you meant to harm me; I was so scared!”

“Mmm… Profound apologies did little to offset the fact he had just been taken down by a sixth year! A sixth year! Now he knew how Lord Voldemort felt!

Dean had been standing outside the corridor directing other witches and wizards out of the area when the noise had begun. He entered in time to get spattered by gobs of goo and see two of his aurors go down, the third already on the floor! The situation had clearly gotten out of hand; Dean immediately disarmed Holly to put a stop to things...

“And how would you view this, this—” Dean stopped short of saying fiasco, but was thinking it. How was he to know Holly had a second wand? Well, he did; she’d bought one after her escape from Sir and probably had her original one too… But he never thought she’d carry them both! That just wasn’t done! Well, then again, Dean remembered the report of Sir’s arrest; he’d had a second wand also… Perhaps that was where Holly had gotten the idea… Except she wasn’t there at the arrest when they found the second wand...

“A success,” answered Luna promptly.
“A success?” echoed Dean in surprise.
“Miss Wycliff has behaved most satisfactorily.”
She did? “You sure?” Dean asked dryly.
“Yes. I wasn’t, until she drew on you.”
“Drew on me? Was that part of the plan?”
“No. It is often the unexpected that determines things.”
“Carrying a second wand determined things?” he asked in disbelief.
“No. Miss Wycliff has carried a second wand ever since her experience in the Tom Riddle world,” Luna replied serenely. “She values it very much and usually only draws it under situations of extreme stress… That Miss Wycliff didn’t…”
“What do you mean she didn’t?”
“That wasn’t her second wand…”
“Not her second wand?” echoed Dean in disbelief.
“No. That was her first! The one Sir took from her.”
First? “How many wands does Miss Wycliff have?”
“Three, that I know of…”
“That you know of?”
“Yes, she could have more. Miss Wycliff is very paranoid. Perhaps you should alert the aurors to the possibility of more than one wand on an opponent,” she continued serenely. “I’m sure you would have responded differently had you rea—”

“What’s going on?” interjected a new voice. Dean turned and saw Rita Skeeter with quill, camera and paper hovering around her expectantly. Rita was wearing a canary yellow suit with a matching hat and shoes. A lime green ostrich feather stuck out of her hat. Her perfectly manicured long fingernails were painted lime green in colour too.

“A security drill,” Dean answered promptly. “It was scheduled on the Ministry calendar for this day,” he added.

“Yes, but not the specifics,” replied Rita. She looked curiously at Luna. “What are you doing
“Observing,” Luna replied serenely.

“Professor Lovegood works with the students who aspire to be aurors and was looking for new training ideas…” informed Dean.

“Oh.” Rita pouted with disinterest. “What was all that noise?” she asked as she peered into the corridor…

“A distraction, of course,” replied Dean. “We were testing its usefulness as a security feature…”

“Is that Ho—”

“This is a Ministry event,” Dean interrupted. “With Ministry employees some of whom may be aurors. I must request you keep all names and photos of people out of any story you write, unless you wish to photograph me…” he suggested hopefully.

The *Daily Prophet* had never lost a case since Rita Skeeter took over, but it had come close, once. It had been after the Last Battle. The *Prophet* had written an article and in it, identified a young witch both by name and as an auror… The enterprising young witch promptly sued the *Prophet* for a lifetime loss of income; she argued that, by revealing her name and profession, the *Prophet* had compromised her safety and prevented her from effectively doing a job as an auror making her unemployable at regular auror salaries. It would have been a laughable lawsuit except, at the same time, the Ministry made its own charges against the *Daily Prophet*: 37 counts of accessory to murder!

The Ministry had taken stock of the survivors after the Last Battle and realized that, of the many members it had lost, a significantly large number had been aurors! The new Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, decided it was because they and their work had been highly publicized making them obvious targets for Lord Voldemort and his supporters. The main publicizer was, of course, the *Daily Prophet*.

Connecting the *Prophet* with all those deaths was also laughable, except, sentiment against Lord Voldemort and his supporters was high at the time. The general public wanted someone to blame for all the losses they had endured and Lord Voldemort was dead… The *Prophet* settled out of court. All charges were dropped in exchange for an agreement to never again print or publicize the names and/or photos of aurors without that individual’s express written permission… Ownership of the *Prophet* and all its assets would transfer to the Ministry should the agreement ever be breeched. In addition, the young auror originally named dropped her lawsuit in exchange for a well-paid position at the *Prophet*. She publicly vowed to “protect” the *Daily Prophet* from future auror-related lawsuits.

“Those are surely not aurors,” protested Rita.

“True,” agreed Dean, “but we’re trying to recruit them. Anonymity is part of being an auror so you need to keep them out of the paper as if they were. If you’re interested,” Dean continued, “you can report the drill went rather well. The new spells we tried will be a definite advantage during future encounters. I can’t give you any of the specifics, of course, security and all…”

“You can’t seriously expect *them* to join, do you?” Rita asked disparagingly refusing to be distracted.

“Why not?” questioned Dean. “They’re of age, mostly,” he amended. Holly was still underaged. “We’ll take recruits wherever we can. If you wish to interview them, fine, but no names or photos…”

Rita sniffed and moved off; there was nothing she could or would write about. Angry about the settlement, Rita had printed numerous articles disparaging aurors. No names were mentioned so her auror employee let them through (rumour had it the auror had *helped* write them!) While the Ministry protested loudly about the unfair portrayals, it made no legal objection. The articles were a source of considerable annoyance to Dean, however, who was trying to put together a new auror staff. Later, Dean realized Rita’s comments helped, as witches and wizards paid less attention to aurors and their activities, adding one more layer of protection for the aurors. It also helped insure those who applied were sincere about helping the Ministry oppose dark wizards and weren’t just
after the headlines.

“Your lies are improving,” murmured Luna.

“Yeah, well I’ve gotten a lot of practice lately,” retorted Dean with annoyance. “You do realize that three of your graduates were just taken down by a sixth year, don’t you?”

“That was one of the possible outcomes for the situation Miss Wycliff was given,” informed Luna serenely. "My graduates were instructed to not interfere unless necessary."

“And you don’t think it was necessary?” Dean asked in disbelief.

“No. Miss Wycliff was in total control of her actions the whole time. Not only that, she effectively removed a perceived threat while casting defensive spells which harmed no one.”

“Just what did she do at Hogwarts?” Dean questioned; he had only been sent the barest of details when Luna put in a request to use aurors to field test Holly.

“A spell that missed,” answered Luna bluntly, “fortunately.”

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“Welcome back,” greeted Anthony Richards. “We’ve missed you.” and they had, at least Anthony had. The Advisor meetings hadn’t seemed quite the same without Wycliff. Also, they could again use the Room of Requirement…

“Where were you?” asked Scorpius bluntly.

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“The Ministry!” whispered Basu angrily once she’d gotten Anthony alone.

“Huh?”

“Wycliff’s at the Ministry!” explained Basu further. “What is she doing at the Ministry? She should be in school like the rest of us!”

“Haven’t you permission to leave school for your lectures?” reminded Anthony.

“Yes,” agreed Basu proudly. “But I’ve earned it! Everything is handed to Wycliff! I thought it was bad enough when Potter abused his visiting privileges as Hogwarts Governor to take Wycliff out while school was in session. Worse to know when she’s still there! What is she doing at the Ministry when she should be in school?”

“Potter took her?”

“Saturday morning,” answered Basu. “They left before the carriages were even scheduled to run! And

she’s still there! What is she doing at the Ministry when she should be in school?”

“Wycliff’s activities interfere with your plans?” persisted Anthony.

“No,” Basu admitted.

”Then Wycliff is of no consequence,” Anthony told her. That’s what Paige had said all the time to Tom. He never listened, but Anthony could see the merit behind her words now. “You would do best to forget her and instead work on your presentation and what you intend to say,” he advised.

“I already know that.”

“Then run it past Febland for suggestions.”

“Febland! But he’s only a Hufflepuff!”

“Exactly. As will be much of your audience. Hufflepuffs don’t think like us,” he told Basu. “Who better to insure your presentation will be well received by Hufflepuffs than Febland?”

“True…”

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Wycliff stirred uncomfortably at Scorpius’ question. “I was working with Wizard Pilkington,”
she mumbled looking down as she spoke.

“An Internship?” exploded Scorpius. “During the school year? How’d you manage that?!!”
“None of your business!” snapped Fitzpatrick protectively.

“Some other time,” spoke Anthony Richards aloud before Scorpius could respond. “Unless it has to do with Hogwarts or the kidnappers. And then, it really is our business… But I don’t think a simple internship falls into that category…”

Of course, Anthony was was fairly certain it had been no internship. Anthony had worked with Pilkington over the summer; Pilkington was a stickler for the rules. The Ministry did not approve of Internships done with a parent or legal guardian. Granted, Pilkington was only an alternate guardian, but that would be close enough for him to refuse. Besides, Internships were traditionally much longer than the two weeks Wycliff had been absent. Something else had happened with Wycliff. Anthony intended on asking her when Scorpius wasn’t around.

“Why don’t we talk about Turay instead,” he suggested.

“Turay uses the main stairs to go to the dorms,” Pilkington reported.

“So?” questioned Scorpius. “What’s interesting about that?”

“Nothing. It’s just that she hasn’t used the passageway.”


“She doesn’t use the passage?” questioned Wycliff. “Why not?”

“We haven’t asked,” came the answer. “It could be nothing; Turay hasn’t been using the library to study either so the stairs could seem easier. But she seemed surprised when Corner arrived to the dorm ahead of her one day; he was using it…”

“That’s weird,” stated Fitzpatrick. “She used it all the time last year. Why do you think she doesn’t?”

“We’re not sure; perhaps she wants more exercise; maybe it’s something else.”


Pilkington sighed. “We’ve a secret passage to our dorm,” she explained. “It’s faster than the main stairs but Turay doesn’t use it, or, rather she hasn’t used it lately…”

Anthony stared at them in disbelief. “Was it in H2?” he finally asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Why don’t I know about it?”

“You’re not Ravenclaw,” she said dismissively. “Why would you? We did say that the structure of H2 was consistent with a second year’s Ravenclaw’s knowledge of Hogwarts; that includes knowledge of the passageway. We would have told you were the passage missing…”

“But, they know about it!” Anthony accused while looking at Wycliff and Fitzpatrick.

“I got permission to use it a while back,” Wycliff answered vaguely, “but I don’t think it was working quite right at H2,” she added talking to Pilkington. “She kept letting me in and I’m not Ravenclaw…”

“Knowledge is not limited to Ravenclaws,” Pilkington said vaguely, “which brings us to you.” She turned her head and fixed her brown eyes on Anthony.

“Huh?”

“Yeah,” chimed in Fitzpatrick. “What are you hiding?”

“What do you mean?” denied Anthony.

“You’ve been keeping something from us ever since you first made inquiries about Turay.”

“I haven’t…” sputtered Anthony.

“And now you’re lying,” said Wycliff flatly.

“Out with it!” ordered Fitzpatrick. “We’ve let you keep your secret but it’s pretty clear something is off with Turay, something you knew about from the beginning, something you aren’t telling us and it’s time you shared, time we pooled our knowledge together.”

“I can’t,” began Anthony.

“Then we leave,” said Pilkington standing up breaking the Muffliato spell as she did. Wycliff
and Fitzpatrick stood as well. “And take our observations to Headmistress McGonagall.”

“Perhaps she’ll be more helpful than her Assistant,” added Fitzpatrick cuttingly.

“You know us,” said Wycliff softly while fixing her green eyes on his. “If you can’t trust us, if we can’t talk honestly with each other, then there is no point in meeting any more…”

Anthony stared at the three. It was a defining moment. He knew that if he let the three walk out, there would be no more Advisor meetings. Did he want that? He hadn’t been specifically told to keep it secret, but what had happened with Thackeray was Slytherin business and not to be shared with outsiders. On the other hand, he did know these three. They weren’t Slytherins, but they did keep secrets; they hadn’t spread their conversations about at H2. Except, this was Hogwarts, not H2. Would they behave differently with other adults around?

“We can keep secrets, if we must,” voiced Pilkington as if she could read his thoughts. “But we have to know what’s going on…” She waited expectantly; they all did.

Then Wycliff looked away. “Come on,” she said in a disappointed sounding voice. “I’ve homework to do…” The three stepped away from the table and headed towards the door…

“Wait!” Anthony called abruptly while rising from his seat as well. Scorpius stood with him.

“Don’t!” advised Scorpius. “This is blackmail! You don’t need them or their reports! Ivy will watch Turay…” he promised.

That was true, but was that enough? And their actions did amount to blackmail unless… “Quid pro quo!” Anthony blurted. It was a legal term meaning something for something. “The passageway information was volunteered,” Anthony added thinking quickly. “How about telling us why you were really at the Ministry!” Scorpius looked at Anthony in surprise. Had Scorpius actually bought Wycliff’s story?

“Forget that!” retorted Fitzpatrick. “Come on!” He turned taking Wycliff’s arm trying to turn her too.

“No,” decided Wycliff aloud while shaking off Fitzpatrick’s hand. “It doesn’t matter that much,” she told the others. “And I think the Turay stuff may be important… But if this comes out, I’ll know who told!” she added looking directly at Scorpius.

“What? You don’t trust me?” Scorpius asked in an affronted voice.

“No!” Holly replied bluntly.

“Why not? I’ve never talked about anything here!”

“Not to anyone I know of,” she conceded, “but I have trust issues, especially with people like you.”

“Slytherins?”

“No. Occlumency.” Scorpius seemed to puff up at the word. He’d been very proud he’d passed his Occlumency test during the summer. “I was at the Ministry getting used to people who do Occlumency,” Wycliff continued. “They’re everywhere there!”

“That’s it?” questioned Anthony in surprise. “I thought it was something, ah, men-medical.”

He meant mental, but didn’t say it aloud. Wycliff looked down clearly uncomfortable.

“That shouldn’t be a big deal,” scoffed Scorpius.

“Obviously you’ve forgotten last year’s duels,” retorted Pilkington dryly. “Holly took out Vaisy and MacAra without batting an eye,” she reminded.

That caused Scorpius to pause. MacAra had been a dueling champion. “So, did it work?” asked Scorpius changing the subject.

“Yeah, I think so,” Wycliff replied. “At least I’m fairly certain the urge I have to transfigure you into a goblet every time I see you has nothing to do you being a kidnapper out to get me…”

“Hey! It wasn’t my idea!” Scorpius denied piously.


Anthony thought. Was Wycliff’s answer enough? It would have to be. He could tell she wouldn’t say more, not here anyway. “You mustn’t tell either!” he insisted.
“No promises,” stated Fitzpatrick stubbornly while crossing his arms defiantly. “You talk; then we’ll decide…”

Anthony hesitated.

“Good grief!” exclaimed Pilkington. “Spit it out. It won’t go anywhere!”

Anthony took a deep breath. “OK, I know who Nellie is! But you mustn’t tell because I can’t prove it and if I tell she’ll deny it and destroy the evidence, if she hasn’t already and then I’ll never get the reward!”

“You mean this is all about the stupid reward!” said Fitzpatrick derisively.

“It’s rather large and not stupid,” Anthony corrected, “and if someone’s going to get it, why not me?”

“If the identity of Nellie indeed leads to the kidnappers, then by all means you deserve the reward. But reward aside, if there’s no proof, revealing her identity to the Ministry would alert ‘Nellie’ and give her a chance to escape,” said Pilkington. “Fortunately, we don’t need the evidence to hear what you have to say…” She moved back to the table and sat down. Fitzpatrick and Wycliff did too.

Anthony drew his wand. “Muffliato!” he shouted. Then he and Scorpius sat down. And Anthony told them what happened over the holidays…

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“Turay never once did any kind of sleep magic,” stated Pilkington when Anthony Richards had finished his tale. “We’d have noticed.

“But if she isn’t a Dreamer, why is she lying?” asked Fitzpatrick after “Dreamer” was explained to him and Wycliff.

“Because she’s either a very good Dreamer and you missed it,” concluded Scorpius while looking at Pilkington, “or she’s lying to protect someone else, most likely Thackeray.”

“Why would she do that if she doesn’t like Thackeray?” questioned Wycliff.

“That’s easy: Thackeray’s family,” replied Scorpius confidently. “You don’t turn on family, ever…” “unless you had to…”

“Do you suppose Turay’s odd behavior is connected to her being asleep for so long?” wondered Wycliff.

“Possibly. It can’t have been good for her…” agreed Fitzpatrick.

**********

“She’s very convincing when she talks about her experiences in Europe,” informed Leila one day. “I’d have never realized it was all a lie.”

They were all in the Room of Requirement for another meeting. Holly Wycliff leaned back in her chair restlessly. She had homework to do and hoped they’d quit soon. Holly wasn’t sure why she kept on coming to the “Advisor” meetings; it just seemed the thing to do.

“Perhaps she doesn’t think she’s lying,” stated Conner thoughtfully. “Maybe Thackeray has meddled with her memories and Nadia thinks she was in Europe the whole time. That would explain why she hasn’t contradicted the story Thackeray made up to explain her absences.”

“Perhaps Thackeray was at all those places and she put those memories into Nadia like she was a pensieve…” added Holly thoughtfully. Pensieve... Umbridge... “Trelawney!” she said aloud while leaning forward excitedly. “Turay’s taking Divination this year!”

“Yeah, so?” questioned Richards.

“What does Professor Trelawney say about her?” persisted Holly. “We can ask the Thirds!”


“Not exactly,” corrected Holly. “She kept on complaining about that Evil Eye when we were in class,” she reminded. “And Umbridge had been there the whole time under a disillusionment spell! They don’t get much eviler—well they do,” Holly amended while thinking of Sir, “but she was still pretty bad!”
“Seriously?” questioned Richards. “I just thought Trelawney said all that because it fit with Paige’s story and made the old bat look like she actually had a gift!”

“She does have the gift,” corrected Holly firmly, “sometimes,” she amended remembering how much of what Trelawney had said that year seemed more weird than prophetic. “And she certainly did then. We need to ask our Thirds about her…”

Leila sighed. “Professor Trelawney took one look at Turay and said, “It’s been a long while since you’ve been to school…” And then she announced that Turay was “…destined for a very long life … or a short one.” Which could have accurately applied to any one of the students present.”

“How do you know?” questioned Conner, impressed.

“We talked about Professor Trelawney in the dorms,” she informed him. “Every year on the evening of the first day of Professor Trelawney’s class, we recount all of her statements and discuss whether or not they are actual predictions. We record the most promising ones and review the statements she has made in previous years for accuracy in the light of current knowledge. Professor Trelawney claims to be able to foretell the future, you see,” Lelia explained. “That means we need to wait for the “future” to see if anything comes of them…”

“And has it,” questioned Anthony curiously.

Leila shrugged. “Some have, most haven’t or, rather, haven’t happened yet… Probably never will… So far, Professor Trelawney’s successes seem to be nothing statistically out of the ordinary.”

Holly sighed and leaned back in her chair. “Oh, well, it was an idea…”

**********

“Welcome to the first Hogwarts Quidditch game!” announcer Jordon Vaughn (G5) said loudly as Anthony made his way to his seat. “Well, actually, it’s the second quidditch game but the first one at Hogwarts… Does the first one count for House Cup purposes?” she asked as an aside. “It should, I mean we played it, but I’m not sure how… What do you think? Should we divide house points by team members—”

“Get on with it!” growled a voice in the audience, several voices, actually.

“Look! The teams are already on the pitch!” Vaughn announced. “Aren’t the red and green colours pretty!” Red was for the Gryffindors and green for the Slytherins. “And there’s Madam Hooch!”

Once classes were settled, there was a huge push to start a quidditch match. The Slytherin wanted to show the Firsts what a proper quidditch game really looked like. Some students wanted to squish all four matches in the spring somehow. There was no precedent for that. Anthony used his position as the Headmistress’ Assistant to make it happen. Practice time had to be allotted before the first game, but after that, the games would be squished together in quick succession finishing at the end of the term. Anthony and the Advisors worked hard setting up game dates and developing a practice schedule so all teams would have equal time allotted to practice, some of it at the actual pitch and some over Lulu’s pen. Lulu—the place looked so bare without the orchard in full bloom. Anthony often wondered what happened to all those trees and the beautiful glass and vine covering they had constructed turning it into a proper greenhouse.

Excitement ran high for this first match. Anthony took his place next to McGonagall in the section reserved for parents and visiting dignitaries. It was full of people, here to assure themselves that everything was indeed fine with their children. It was a great opportunity for Anthony to renew acquaintances and connections. Scorpius was playing in the game as Seeker, so Anthony didn’t bother insisting on the Advisors sit with him. They sat with their respective houses.

“And they’re off!” shouted Vaughn excitedly.

Vaughn did an excellent job calling out all the action. Anthony didn’t bother listening; he could see everything perfectly from his seat. In his mind’s eye, however, Anthony couldn’t help but see the other game, at H2, with seekers flying about in armored suits, a net beneath for safety… This game seemed hollow in comparison somehow. There was no real sense of accomplishment when everything was pre-made and spelled.
“Did you see that!” exclaimed Vaughn excitedly. “He’s got it! Malfoy’s got the snitch!” The game had gone on for nearly an hour with neck and neck scores when Beater Hugo Weasley (G3) sent the bludger straight at Scorpius. Beater Crabbe (S2) blocked it, barely, but Scorpius had dodged to keep from crashing into Crabbe. Unexpectedly, that dodge sent him right in front of the snitch! He reached out and grabbed it before anyone realized the snitch had been in front of him. Like that, the game was over. The Slytherins had won, 200-60! The Slytherins cheered. The rest of the students clapped politely. Everyone rose to leave.

“A good game,” congratulated McGonagall.

“Yes, ma’am,” agreed Anthony. But in his mind, he was remembering a game where everyone cheered and no one cared who won.

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“We were remembering H2,” Pilkington said in a dreamy voice the next day. “The good times,” she clarified. “The game and the meal afterwards…” her voice died off in reflection.

“Yeah, that was a good one,” agreed Fitzpatrick though Anthony Richards wasn’t sure whether he meant the game, the meal or both.

Anthony Richards closed his eyes in thought. Was the food really better at H2 or just their memories of it?

“Turay couldn’t remember any of that, of course,” Pilkington added looking up at the group. “So she started talking about good food in general…”

“Turay likes beef and kidney pie, clotted cream, crumpets and Sorbi…”

“Sorbi?” questioned Fitzpatrick. “Never heard of it.”

“It was one of those drinks Wizard Ercwlff sold,” she replied informatively. “Dad used to drink it,” she added. “Turay said it reminded her of a really good spell she cast… We asked her what but she wouldn’t say… Have you ever tried Sorbi?”

Anthony shook his head. Tom had liked it, but there was never any in the house or Tom’s flat and Anthony didn’t have enough personal income or interest at the time to buy some just to try. “That’s not Nadia!” announced Wycliff suddenly in a strangled sounding voice. Anthony looked at her and then looked again. Wycliff had risen from her seat. Her face was totally white; the only colour remaining were her green eyes that seemed to glow intensely. “The Kidnapper!” she added breathlessly. “She’s got to be the kidnapper! And she’s been here! … All along! … Right under our noses!” Wycliff reached out and grabbed the bucket that suddenly appeared in front of her, tipped her head over it and began to heave violently. “We’ve got to tell someone!” she said between heaves. “Do something!” Parchment, a small bowl of black ink and a smoky gray quill materialized in front of Wycliff. Wycliff grabbed the quill, dipped it into the ink and began to write.

“What are you doing?” asked Scorpius.

“Writing Paige,” she answered between scribbles. “She’ll know what to do!”

“Not before you tell us!” replied Anthony and he swiftly snatched the quill out of Wycliff’s hand.

Undaunted, another quill appeared; Wycliff grabbed it and resumed writing. Pilkington stepped forward and pulled the quill from her grasp. “Talk to us first,” she commanded. “Turay’s one of ours!”

“Turay is,” agreed Wycliff, “but that’s not Turay!”

“How do you know!” challenged Scorpius. “And don’t tell us it’s an emotional thing—you already told us you can’t sense Turay’s emotions…”

Wycliff drew in a deep breath no doubt stalling; the group waited. “Because Nadia hates Sorbi!”

“How do you know that?”

“She said so, right here in this room!”

Anthony blinked in confusion. Turay had been the subject of much discussion while at H2. As near as he could remember, Turay had been in the Room of Requirement with Wycliff only
once. “But that was Sabois we were discussing that day,” he reminded aloud.

“Sabois and Sorbi are the same thing!”

“What!!!”

“That doesn’t make sense!” said Fitzpatrick.

“Sabois was marketed exclusively at Hogwarts,” Wycliff explained. “It was sold around the rest of the Wizard community as Sorbi… There were even plans to market it in France under a different name…”

“Brilliant!” murmured Scorpius approvingly.

“How do you know?” asked Pilkington.

“Because, because, I can’t talk about that,” Wycliff answered determinedly. “There’s no, um, client confidentiality here,” she added as explanation.

“Client confidentiality?” That was a legal term! Anthony knew it from his time with Wizard Pilkington. Perhaps Wycliff had been with Wizard Pilkington during her time at the Ministry.

“But I know!” Wycliff stated without doubt. “And there’s no way Nadia would change her mind on this despite the different names.”

“People change,” argued Pilkington. “Grow older, develop different tastes,” she reminded. “It’s been two years since Wizard Ercwlff died. Perhaps Thackeray had some Sorbi in storage, shared it with Turay and she liked it…”

Wycliff fixed her green eyes on Anthony. “What do you think?” she asked. “Would you change your mind if you were handed a glass of Sabois under any other name?”

Anthony swallowed. He remembered that sharp bitter taste clearly. “No,” he said aloud. “I don’t think I would…"

“And neither would she,” said Wycliff firmly. “I don’t care what she looks like, that’s not Nadia!”

“It would explain a lot,” mused Pilkington thoughtfully. “Those memory gaps, the wrong bed. She doesn’t use the passage because she doesn’t know about the passage which means she’s not Ravenclaw…” Pilkington concluded aloud. “But it can’t be done!” she protested in the same breath. “Polyjuice only lasts an hour! And then you have to take more. Turay hasn’t been drinking anything every hour on the hour. How is she keeping the shape?”

“Perhaps it’s a newer longer lasting version of polyjuice,” suggested Anthony. Paige was a whiz with potions. If anyone could develop something like that, it was her, but would she?

“Perhaps,” conceded Pilkington. “But I’ve never seen her eat from any private stores of food. So I just can’t believe she is maintaining a spell that way.

“She could be a metamorphangus,” suggested Fitzpatrick hesitantly while looking at Wycliff.

“Metamorphangus?” questioned Anthony mentally while wondering how Fitzpatrick knew about them. They weren’t common and Fitzpatrick was a Mudblood who scarce took an interest in the Wizard world.

“Seriously?” scoffed Scorpius. “Who would want to morph into Turay?”

“No,” agreed Wycliff, “at least not, uh, that one; I checked last week… But, perhaps it’s one we don’t know about…”

“That one?” wondered Anthony. Who was she talking about? What did Wycliff know about Metamorphangai? “This is all interesting speculation,” he said aloud. “But it brings us to the same problem as before—” he said; she said,” or, in this case, “she said; she said…” If you tell people Turay’s the kidnapper because she likes Sorbi, she’ll change her story and deny it all. It’s not the kind of proof we can take to the Ministry.

“Veritserum!” said Wycliff. “Give her some Veritserum and then it won’t be “she said; she said!” It’ll be the truth!”

“Got some?” asked Fitzpatrick bluntly.

“No,” admitted Wycliff, “but it shouldn’t be too hard to get…”

“Along with consent or a warrant?” asked Pilkington. “You won’t get the former and there’s not enough evidence to get the latter!”

“I was thinking of just slipping it in her tea and asking questions,” replied Wycliff. “You can
worry about the warrant stuff later.”

“Worry about it now!” insisted Pilkington. “You can’t just do stuff like that to people even when you think you’re right.”

“I am right!” assured Wycliff. “That isn’t Nadia; that’s the kidnapper!”

“And then you would be wrong!” informed Pilkington. “Turay can’t be the kidnapper! She was asleep all summer and fall and in the dorm during the attacks, both of them!”

“You sure?” asked Wycliff looking confused.

“Certain!” Pilkington replied. “We’ve been keeping note of every time Turay comes in and out! Turay’s whereabouts was the first thing we checked when you went missing,” she added looking at Anthony. “And we checked again when Basu was discovered missing.”

“Then there’s still a kidnapper out there,” stated Scorpius ominously, “or an accomplice.”

“And Nadia,” reminded Fitzpatrick, “the real Nadia! We’ve got to find and rescue her!”

“So what’ll we do?” whispered Wycliff…

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“Do” was a private conversation with Lovegood. Pilkington insisted. If Truay really wasn’t Turay, then it had to be a piece of serious Dark Magic. That was Lovegood’s department. Plus, the whole Ravenclaw house was at risk with Turay sleeping there and Lovegood was House head. Whether she believed the story or not, Lovegood needed to be told.

Anthony would inform McGonagall. Fitzpatrick insisted. He offered to talk with McGonagall too, but Anthony declared it was his “duty” as “Assistant,” to tell McGonagall. If she had to be told, Anthony wanted to make sure he got the credit. It would insure he could control exactly what she heard...

They also wrote long letter to Paige. Anthony insisted. Paige had essentially escorted Turay from London to Hogwarts. If the person she escorted wasn’t Turay, then Turay had to still be in London, perhaps she had never left the house… Someone would have to check. Who better than Paige?

Finally, they sent a note to the Hufflepuff, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw prefects to, “Watch Turay like the others! Watch and report!”

“Like the others?” questioned Anthony when he saw the note. “What’s that supposed to mean?” It wasn’t lost on him the fact that the note was not going to the Slytherin prefects suggesting the “others” were, in fact, Slytherins.

Wycliff, Pilkington and Fitzpatrick all stared at him a moment before Fitzpatrick growled, “You’ll find out! You can ask the Slytherins to watch her too, if you want,” he added as an after thought.

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Anthony Richards found out what it meant the next day. Fitzpatrick, Pilkington and Wycliff came in each with bag of papers. Torn scraps, loose sheets, rolled parchments, all containing information about Turay. The group sat down and began to read through it. Pilkington and Fitzpatrick took charge of the sorting—mostly by day. Some of the scraps referred back to the first days of their return to Hogwarts and before, including train observations… There were notes on what Turay ate, what she wore, where she went, who she talked to, what she said, the time she rose in the morning… Anthony had asked the others about Turay before and he knew they’d been watching her, just not how intently. Pilkington had apparently only been reporting the highlights. Though the others never made any verbal contribution, they had all been watching. The most surprising part was that, even now, Turay appeared unaware that she was being watched.

No one seemed to have physically dug through Turay’s things or questioned her directly, but the information still seemed somehow invasive! “Like the others!” the message to the prefects had read. “Have you been watching us like this!” Anthony demanded suddenly!

“Us?” questioned Pilkington innocently.
“The Slytherins,” clarified Anthony. “Have you been watching us like you do Turay?”
“Yeah,” admitted Fitzpatrick without a hint of guilt. “Want to make something of it?”
“How dare you!” Anthony stood and drew his wand; Fitzpatrick drew his wand standing as well…

“Expelliarmus!” Both Anthony and Fitzpatrick’s wands flew out of their hands! The pungent scent of eucalyptus filled the air. Anthony looked about. Pilkington, Wycliff and Scorpius were also standing with their wands drawn. Pilkington’s wand was aimed at Fitzpatrick while Wycliff’s was aimed directly at him! Anthony stared at their grim determined faces and was again reminded of Malfoy Senior’s words: “You have also managed to unite the whole student body against you!”

“Why are you surprised?” Pilkington asked in a bored voice as she lowered her wand. “Face it! You Slytherins went overboard last year and we had to do something to protect ourselves!”

“Did you think we’d let you do something like that to us again this year?” Fitzpatrick questioned as he stretched out his hand. “Accio wand!” he commanded. The wand flew into his hand.

“But, that was, … the Hand!”

“Not all of it,” corrected Wycliff while pocketing her own wand. She walked over to the wall behind her and picked up Scorpius’ wand. “The Hand only magnified what was already there,” she told him. “You kept them in check at H2—”

“More likely it was the situation,” growled Fitzpatrick, “and you realized you needed us to get out!”

“Whatever,” said Pilkington. “The point is we aren’t at H2 any more and the rules have changed—or more accurately, reverted. Every Slytherin is trying to do the same kind of antics they did last year!”

“Nearly every,” corrected Wycliff softly and she handed the wand back to Anthony while keeping a tight hold on her own.

“That behavior is unacceptable!” continued Pilkington firmly. “We will not let you repeat it! We are here to learn, not be bullied!”

“We can discuss bullies some other time,” Scorpius suggested before Anthony could respond. He pocketed his own wand and added, “I’ve still homework to do. Why don’t we finish with all this stuff now.” He indicated the pile of paper containing observations of Turay.

Anthony pocketed his wand and slowly sat down. The others sat too. They again turned their attention to the Turay observations. As they worked, Anthony pondered what he had just learned. They’d been watched! All of them! And he had never noticed! Why? For what purpose? To what effect? Anthony also got the impression that the others had been doing things too! What? Why didn’t he know? He remembered hearing several of the other Slytherins complain that their spells didn’t seem to be working right. Did that relate? Anthony had just assumed they didn’t do their spells right. But was that the real reason? Was there some other cause? What should he do about it?

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Chapter 38

Mrs. Paige Brenna Crowley stood outside the front door of the Thackeray residence. Roland DeWitt stood next to her. DeWitt carried a huge green and gold carpetbag filled with potion samples and select high-end wares from Tom’s store that Paige could use to make “amends” with Thackeray. That was the official purpose of their visit. Unofficially, well, a week had passed since Paige received the letter from Anthony making the most unusual claims about Turay. The claims could have easily been dismissed; they hinged on such a slender thread: Sorbi. But threads like that were often the only way to identify a dark wizard. Hadn’t Sir given himself away by a mere change in eye colour? Sorbi vs. Sabois. Wycliff was one of the few people outside the Aurors who knew the secret of the two drinks and could have recognized the significance of Turay’s statement. If Turay had disliked one, she surely would recognize and dislike the other. That she hadn’t… It wasn’t enough to convict, but definitely enough to investigate…

Paige had sent several owls to Thackeray during the week bearing apologies and potion offers in an attempt to contact her. There had been no response. She also got Tom to send an invitation to Thackeray: 50% off everything in the store! Discount Day! No response. Further investigation seemed to indicate that no one else had seen Thackeray since the newspaper interviews where she thanked everyone for their concern about Turay. That was before Paige had received that Howler from Thackeray. Apparently, Paige was the last person to receive any contact at all from Thackeray… No, maybe not. Anthony had reported Turay had secured a signed permission slip to go to Hogsmead. If the signature was authentic it could be the last known communication of Thackeray…

Paige stared up at Thackeray’s huge front door with its brass twisting snake door knocker. “It shouldn’t be that easy to Apparate to the front door after she revoked your visiting privileges,” commented DeWitt worriedly while drawing his wand.

Paige agreed but saw no need to admit it aloud. “Perhaps Thackeray isn’t as good at spells as she thinks,” Paige said instead. “But then I’ve never before tried to locate a “revoked privilege” residence… Have you?”

“No,” admitted DeWitt. “Perhaps her Howler was more bluff than reality…”

Paige smoothed her hair back and readjusted her spidersilk scarf and Celtic knot pin one last time before using her wand to cause the snake knocker to rise up and down once. It landed with a loud thud. The door slowly creaked open…

No one stood behind the door. It remained invitingly open revealing an empty entry. “That’s not good!” muttered DeWitt worriedly. “Perhaps we should tell the authorities…” “We are the authorities,” Paige reminded imperiously and, while grasping her wand tightly, Paige stepped cautiously inside. DeWitt followed.

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Everything within looked pretty much as Paige remembered. A parlor with a rosewood cuckoo clock, a settee against the wall, a small table set with a teapot, two cups and saucers and a plate of crumpets, matching chairs with a cheery fire burning in the hearth. Of course, the cuckoo clock hadn’t been splintered the last time. Nor had there been scorch marks on the walls or the table and chairs broken, the tea set smashed and crumpets scattered all over the floor. More importantly, there hadn’t been a body lying on the rug in front of the hearth! “What happened?” whispered DeWitt in disbelief.

Paige had no idea. “Don’t touch anything!” she ordered as the two stepped into the room. Paige moved to the body and knelt to examine it. It was surely Mrs. Thackeray in that familiar looking shapeless purple floral print dress with a broken strand of pearl beads around her neck, and more beads scattered nearby on the floor, but not a Mrs. Thackeray that Paige easily recognized.

When she was four, Paige had been called to the deathbed side of her Great Aunt Matilda with
the rest of her family. Great Aunt Matilda died soon after enabling her family to see what few other witches and wizards could see… It had been a peaceful death, more of a final slumber.

There was nothing peaceful about Mrs. Thackeray’s dead body. Her opened blue unblinking eyes stared at the ceiling. Her disheveled white hair framed a face that was horribly contorted as if screaming in pain. Her wand hand was clutched in a fist, no wand, and her whole body seemed withered and ancient! Paige could discern no actual cause of death, but it was surely very dark in nature!

"Is that really Mrs. Thackeray?" asked DeWitt.
"Yes."

"Homonum Revelio!" shouted DeWitt. Paige looked up and saw his glowing wand pointing about the room. He was right! The killer could still be there, still hiding! Nothing.

"Turay!" she thought abruptly. Paige rose and hurried to Turay’s room. It appeared empty. The princess canopy bed had been neatly made and nothing seemed out of place. "Homonum Revelio!" she shouted. Nothing.

Paige and DeWitt then went through the rest of the house looking for signs of life. Nothing. When they had finished, the two revisited each room looking for things that appeared missing or out of place, clues to what had happened.

"Who could have done this?" questioned DeWitt while looking again at Thackerays’ tortured body.

Paige didn’t bother answering. She had no idea and there was no point in stating the obvious. “The murder had to be recent,” she said instead noting the untended fire had burned low but not out, the butter on the crumpets were still melty and not yet congealed and tea water puddled on the floor.

"Unless some preservation spells were used,” reminded DeWitt. “Then she could have died any time after she sent Turay that permission slip.”

"Assuming the signature is not forged,” reasoned Paige. "No owl sent that permission slip," she reminded.

"And if the signature is forged?"
"Then the murder could have happened earlier...
"That would place it anytime after Turay boarded the Express to Hogwarts," reasoned Dewitt.
"Actually, Thackeray wasn’t at the station to see Turay off,” informed Paige thoughtfully.

"That’s a scary thought."

Paige returned to Turay’s room while DeWitt re-examined the entry. She picked up the book besides the bed, The Tales of Beedle the Bard. Nothing unusual there. Then Paige picked up one of the scrolls stacked on the shelf beneath the book. She removed the ribbon and unrolled it:

Dear Grandmum,

It snowed last night. Everything is beautiful and white. We had a huge snowball fight before breakfast...

Nothing resembling a clue. Paige re-rolled the letter, returned the ribbon and placed the scroll back on the shelf. She went back to the parlor for one last look around and then returned to the entry. “We should go now,” Paige told DeWitt. She held out her arm for DeWitt to take hold.

“Where?” DeWitt questioned as he firmly grabbed her wrist. “The authorities? Oh, wait, we are the authorities!”

Paige rolled her eyes. Their next destination should be obvious. Raising her wand, she Apparated the two.

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Wizard Dean Thomas, Head of Magical Law Enforcement leaned back in his chair. It was a quiet day. No news on the kidnappers, but at least the students were safe at Hogwarts, pretty much. Those two student attacks were disquieting to say the least, not at all in keeping with the villain who captured the students and then basically ignored them for three months. That was twice Manasa
Basu had been singled out and attacked. Were the kidnappings a front to cover an attack specifically directed at her? And why Richards? It made more sense to attack him while at H2 than now…

How had the kidnappers gotten in? Dean had gone personally with Luna to secure the perimeter and seal off all passageways and still the kidnappers attacked! What were they missing?

A knock sounded at his door. Dean looked up. Wizard Pilkington poked his head in. “Have you some time?” he asked. “We’ve a bit of a problem…”

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Chapter 39

The special edition of the *Daily Prophet* announcing the murder of Mrs. Margaret Moore Thackeray, including a wedding photo and life biography, swept through the wizard community like wildfire.

The headlines of the *Daily Prophet* the next day reported that a tearful granddaughter and heiress Nadia Turay had produced a letter from her grandmother dated a mere two days before the discovery of Mrs. Thackeray’s body. The letter was given to the Ministry Officials, of course, but a copy of it was also turned over to the *Prophet*. The *Prophet* printed the letter in full. It detailed a fractious association with Potions Dealer Mrs. Paige Crowley. Mrs. Thackeray wanted to meet in an attempt to resolve differences but was concerned their meeting would not go well given Mrs. Crowley’s rather shady past… Mrs. Thackeray added she was writing Nadia with instructions to give the letter to the authorities in case something went wrong with the meeting…

The rest of the edition covered Paige Brenna Crowley, her potions award, relation with Proprietor Thomas Richards including a canceled wedding, the Imperius Curse lawsuit against her own Aunt Delores Umbridge, Senior Ministry Undersecretary at Large, managing popular S’N S store in Hogsmead, and her near death with the explosion of that same store… The edition reminded readers of Paige’s mysterious connection to the death of Wizard Ercwlff and openly speculated that something similar had happened between Mrs. Crowley and Mrs. Thackeray…

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“She didn’t do it!” stated Anthony Richards fiercely before his “Advisors” had a chance to say anything. Anthony had already endured numerous taunts, and catcalls ever since the *Prophet* came out that morning. They weren’t all quite negative; O’Shea and Gruffud had applauded Paige’s audacity; Basu whispered she was sure Paige’s “Ministry connection” could get her out of this too. What Ministry connection? Anthony wasn’t sure why he agreed to show up at the Room of Requirement anyway—it wasn’t as if he had called the meeting… He’d gotten a note from Pilkington, stating “today, usual time; be there.”

“I don’t care what the *Prophet* says, she didn’t do it!” Anthony repeated.

“We know that,” agreed Fitzpatrick. “We just wanted to know how we could help…”

“And if you think that I’m gonna sit around and listen to—wait, what? You know?” asked Anthony in disbelief.

“Course!” said Wycliff. “We wrote the letter with you, remember?”

“If Crowley went to Thackeray’s residence it was because of that letter we sent her, not some invitation by Thackeray!” stated Fitzpatrick firmly.

“And if Crowley isn’t saying anything about our letter or what’s really going on, it’s because dad told her not to!” continued Pilkington. “Dad always says a little embarrassment never hurt anyone, as long as you win the case in the end! And turning a copy of that letter over to the *Prophet!*” she added critically, “sloppy. Dad also says that those who try their case in the news has nothing of substance for the courts.”

Anthony stared at them in disbelief. Never in his wildest dreams had he expected this kind of response.

“The problem becomes how to prove it,” continued Pilkington. “We don’t want to ruin whatever case dad’s putting together—”

“And we can’t stand by and do nothing either,” added Wycliff.

“I figure the best thing we can do now is send a confirmation letter,” stated Pilkington.

“A what?” questioned Scorpius.

“A confirmation letter,” replied Pilkington. “We use Hogwarts test paper and basically rewrite the letter we sent to Crowley earlier, add all the tiny confirmation-type details we left out of the original, sign and date it but send the letter to dad. That way dad will have the original letter
Crowley has no doubt already given to him, and ours. When he springs the real reason in court why Crowley visited Thackeray, Turay can’t claim it’s a last minute defense concocted by a desperate defendant. Further, there’s no way our statements were coloured by later news reports as we wrote them before any of that information became public…

“You know,” mused Scorpius, “the Prophet is calling Turay an heiress. I wonder how much she is getting… That alone is a pretty good reason for killing both Turay and Thackeray and then impersonating Turay.

“True,” agreed Anthony thoughtfully. He’d been so busy fending off comments he hadn’t taken time to think out the implications of the article. “Assuming she died before the Express left.” Determining time of death was tricky with all the possible magic spells that could be used.

“Now about that letter Thackeray wrote Turay,” continued Pilkington.

“Obviously a forgery,” stated Scorpius promptly. “Like her permission slip to Hogsmead!”

“ Probably,” agreed Pilkington, “And I know dad will be looking into that immediately. But on the off chance the handwriting succeeds in fooling the Ministry, we can lend doubt to its origins.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, Turay claims she received the letter two days before Thackeray’s body was discovered. She never got any mail that day.”

“She didn’t?”

“No at Hogwarts or we’d have it in our notes!” she stated referring to all the information they had received concerning Turay after Wycliff declared Turay wasn’t Turay. “In fact, we’ve been paying special attention to any mail the owl drops in front of Turay ever since she showed up with that signed permission,” Pilkington added. “Corner will attest to all that if need be.”

“Corner?”

“Yes. You may not think much of Corner,” she told Anthony, “but he’s a legal adult and Head Boy; his word is good and he can testify in the courts…”

By the time Anthony left the Room of Requirement, he felt encouraged and energized, something he never expected to happen, especially with a bunch of non-Slytherins. Let the Prophet say what it will, things were not as bad as they seemed…

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A new headline blazed the next day in the Daily Prophet.

Bottle Found!

Confidential sources reveal that a Crowley potions bottle was found beneath Mrs. Thackeray’s body...

Nadia Turay informs us that her dear grandmother did not have any Crowley potions within her possession; that she only did business with reputable potions mixers. So how did that bottle get there? Easy! Paige Crowley was present when Margaret Thackeray died!

Why does the Ministry not act? By her own words, Crowley destroyed the Hogwarts Stadium nearly killing hundreds of students and framed Albus Potter, son of the famous Harry Potter, in the process (journal entries and pertinent testimony given under Veritaserum reprinted on page 5.) Mrs. Crowley also described how she kidnapped and used the Cruciate Curse repeatedly on Holly Wycliff, cousin of the famous Harry Potter! (Journal entries and pertinent testimony given under Veritaserum on page 4.) The Cruciate Curse! Never mind the other crimes to which she has confessed, that act alone should have sent her to Azkaban prison and still Mrs.
Crowley walks free!

And if you think, as Mrs. Crowley claims, that it was all done under the influence of an Imperius Curse, then remember, a mind becomes unhinged after extensive use of an Imperius Curse! Paige Crowley maintains she was under the effects of an Imperius Curse for nearly a year! (See Trial Transcripts, page 3.) What dastardly effects did that have on her mind? Remember Wizard Ercwlff, popular creator of Sabois and Sorbitum? He was last seen arguing with Paige Crowley right before his explosive death! (See Ercwlff reprint, page 2.) And still Mrs. Crowley walks free!

Witnesses say that Mrs. Thackeray sent Mrs. Crowley a Howler forbidding her to return (see Howler, page 3) yet that did not stop Crowley; she returned anyway and we all know what happened next... And still Mrs. Crowley walks free!

What does it take to get deranged, vicious mass murderers off our streets?

Daily Prophet

“I’m sorry,” stated Wizard Dean Thomas, head of Magical Law Enforcement. “But I’m going to have to take you in.” Dean was talking to Paige Crowley in his office. The meeting was highly unorthodox and very unofficial; he shouldn’t be telling her any of this, but Crowley was an auror and his employee; he owed her that much. When this was all over she would still be his employee and they would be working together. The reporters that flocked around Richards’ store believed Mrs. Crowley was trying to take a private lunch, in her potions shop with the doors closed and locked. In reality, Crowley had used the secret passageway reserved only for aurors and Dean had locked his office door so no one would intrude while they were meeting. As it was noon, the outside world assumed Dean was also taking a private lunch away from reporters. It was understandable, as they had been pestering him all morning.

“I know you didn’t do it,” he added apologetically, “but the evidence—it points in your direction...” Rita’s inflammatory reporting had made things worse. The Ministry had been flooded with owls, witches and wizards all demanding action! “I’d tell them all you’re an auror if you want,” he offered, “but frankly, I don’t think it would help. You see, there’s nothing in your vows that prevents you from killing if you believe it’s justified... And this added claim of mental derangement offsets auror judgment...”

Crowley nodded wordlessly. Her black eyes barely blinked and seemed to pierce right through him.

“I’ll be coming with the other aurors to your store at 4,” he added, “That’ll give you time to get your affairs in order. We’ll have a search warrant,” he informed her. “For the entire premises, including the main store and both annexes” meaning the potions and the DeWitt add-ons. “We’ll be searching your flat and your Inlaw’s place at the same time,” Dean added. The advanced warning would give Crowley a chance to notify Pilkington and remove anything she did not want aurors to find... “Should this come to trial it’ll look better for you if you don’t resist,” Dean continued. “You’re innocent, after all, with nothing to fear and nothing to hide...”

Crowley nodded again.

“I just wish I know who leaked about the bottle!” Dean muttered more to himself than Crowley. The bottles were easy enough to get; Crowley had given out numerous samples in her effort to promote her products. It was not unreasonable to think Thackeray had a few bottles of her own, as did the actual murderer. While interesting to note, the auror investigators had not viewed the bottle as conclusive proof of anything; they knew Crowley was an auror too, one who had openly reported the death in the first place. That was not the action of a guilty person. Turay’s insistence
there were no Crowley potions already in the mansion made the bottle’s presence appear
incriminating. If Turay spoke the truth, the bottle had to be a plant of some sort, one Dean had not
intended to publicize.

The details of ongoing investigations were never released to the public. Such a breech of
protocol was serious indeed. Dean wanted to find and plug that leak immediately!

“At least you won’t have to spend your time in Azkaban while awaiting trial!” Dean added in
a more cheerful voice. “We’ve built a holding cell within the Ministry for those accused, but not
convicted, of a high crime. That way, there won’t be a repeat of the, ah, unfortunate, ah, death, of
Sir…” The thought that Sir sat in St. Mungos’ as Mr. Henderson blissfully ignorant of all the crimes
he had committed still rankled. “It’s plain but clean,” Dean added about the holding cell. “You’re
the first one to use it…” he admitted. “Hopefully, you won’t be there long,” he continued. “With
you in confinement, however, maybe we’ll be able to continue our investigation without having to
fend off reporters at every step…”

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Mrs. Paige Brenna Crowley stared curiously around the room that made her holding cell. It
had three walls and bars for the fourth. They looked like ordinary iron bars set in an iron frame to
make the door but there was some sort of spell that prevented Paige from putting her hand
between/through the bars. It was fastened securely with an iron plate, most likely spelled, that
contained a huge keyhole. Beyond the bars, well out of reach, Paige could see an auror seated in a
chair against the corridor wall acting as a guard.

The walls within her room were a splash of colour, a mixture of green, pink, red, blue, yellow,
orange, purple, turquoise, mauve, and olive in no particular design. The flickering lights from the
tiny candelabra in the ceiling overhead made the colours seem to move and dance. Paige raised her
hand towards the candelabra. The chain holding it seemed to shrink causing the candelabra to move
further up towards the ceiling, well out of reach. Paige lowered her hand. The candelabra dropped
down as well, but not close enough to touch.

A skinny cot with a thin gray blanket was set flush against the wall. A small gray table fit
snugly against the corner at the foot of the cot. There was a small alcove to one side scarcely a meter
deep and wide. It contained a sink, a tiny towel and a rather large ornate handle affixed to the wall.
Curious, Paige reached out and turned the handle. The sink morphed into a small toilet and the towel
into a rug beneath. “Economical,” thought Paige as she turned the handle the other direction and
watched the toilet morph back into a sink. “But nothing I would ever use!” As there was nothing
else to do in the room, Paige went to the cot and sat down.

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An hour passed. Paige could hear the clatter of steps indicating the arrival of someone, more
than one someone, from the sound of it. The auror guard outside stood respectfully up. Two
 wizards and one witch wearing Ministry Law Enforcement colours, aurors, passed the guard and
came to the door. One held a tray with some dishes on it. “Step away,” instructed the lead auror
who had drawn his wand in readiness. Paige stood and moved to the back wall. The second auror
drew a key and unlocked the door to Paige’s cell. The heavy bars swung open with a loud creak.
The third auror, the one holding the tray, stepped into the room. She placed the tray on the tiny
table. Paige could see its content, a small napkin, a bowl with some sort of stew within, a spoon, a
tumbler and a pitcher filled with what appeared to be water.

The auror stepped back to the door. “We could request a change of clothes,” she suggested
softly noting Paige was still dressed in her knee-high boots and traveling suit. “Perhaps some
toiletries? An extra blanket?” Paige had known Rita would be there when Thomas came to arrest
her and had dressed her best for the photos she knew would be taken.

Paige stared icily at the auror. Like she would ever change here! But then she relented. “No,
thank you,” she whispered politely. “I’ll be fine,” she told the auror. Paige could not detect any
malice in the offer and it wouldn’t do to aggravate the jailors.

“Very well,” said the auror reluctantly. She backed up to the door. “How about a book?” she suggested hopefully.

“Yes, a book would be nice,” agreed Paige. “Something legal.” An hour in the room had already demonstrated how quickly the time would drag…

“I’ll see what I can find,” the auror promised. She turned and stepped outside. The other auror closed and relocked the door. The three left, leaving Paige again alone with the auror guard sitting in a chair, well out of reach.

Paige picked up the bowl and spoon. The stew smelled delicious but she did not know its source. She sighed regretfully as she moved towards the alcove. With her free hand she turned the ornate handle morphing the sink into a toilet. Then she scraped the stew into the toilet and flushed it. Even here Paige refused to eat foods from unknown origins nor would she admit to others she wasn’t eating their food... Paige returned the bowl and spoon to the tray. It wasn’t so bad. Paige had eaten a heavy tea at three in anticipation of the arrest. That would tide her over until morning. By then, Wizard Pilkington would have found a way to get her out or Tom would manage to get her food she trusted enough to eat. Out would be preferable. There was no real evidence against her. Surely they realized that…

Paige spent her time trying to figure out who had really killed Thackeray. The house had been unplottable yet it had been breached. Not only breached but the owner killed! Not since the days of the Dark Lord had such things happened. That suggested some very old, very powerful magic indeed...

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Another hour passed. The auror guard changed. Paige couldn’t see who the new one was, but she wouldn’t ask. After a while, the new auror stood up at the sound of approaching people. The three aurors returned. Again Paige stood and stepped against the wall. “I’ve brought you a book,” stated the female auror cheerfully as she walked into the room. “It’s The History of Magical Law by Cameron Neach-Lagh,” she added as she placed a thick book with a tattered looking cover, the gilt lettering of the title all rubbed off, on the cot. “That should keep you busy for a while…”

“Thank you,” murmured Paige politely.

“Did you like the stew?” asked the auror noting the empty bowl.

“It was fine,” lied Paige.

“Would you like some more?”

“No, thank-you,” replied Paige hoping her stomach would not choose this moment to “growl.”

“Do you need anything else?” offered the auror while she removed the tray leaving behind the tumbler and pitcher.

“No, thank you.”

“Don’t worry,” she assured Paige cheerfully. “Things will all be sorted in the morning.” And the auror stepped out of the room.

Again alone, Paige returned to the cot. She picked up the book and began to thumb through the pages. It was well worn and terribly out of date having been printed in the 1600’s, but the book helped to pass the time. After a while, Paige tired of reading; she set the book on the floor, lay back on the cot, closed her eyes and went to sleep.

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Paige woke feeling terribly thirsty. She blearily sat up, reached for the pitcher and poured some water into the tumbler. She set the pitcher down and brought the tumbler to her lips. Paige was about to drink when she suddenly realized where she was; despite her thirst, not eating from unknown sources included not drinking… With difficulty Paige kept herself from drinking. But she felt so thirsty; surely there would be nothing wrong with Ministry water… It would make her happy to take a just tiny sip… Happy?!!! At a time like this? That didn’t seem right! The tumbler slipped
from Paige’s fingers and fell to the floor spilling water everywhere. The clatter as it landed seemed echo through her head. Happy was how one felt while under the influence of the Imperius Curse!

Paige ignored the urge to grab the pitcher and drink directly from it and instead bent down and picked up the tumbler. “It’s the Imperius Curse!” Paige thought to herself as she refilled the tumbler with water; she was certain of it! Paige hadn’t felt those happy kind of urges since that time she spent with the Potters after the explosion! Mr. Potter had offered to show her what he had done to help his son Albus resist the curse. The sessions hadn’t taken long and Paige had easily thrown off the spells. She never expected to feel that way again; certainly not here or now!

What should she do? Paige again brought the tumbler to her lips, but very slowly. Without turning her head, she used the opportunity to look all about seeking to see who had cast the curse. She saw no one. Literally! No guard sat in the chair outside! That was not good! Where was the guard? What had happened to her? Paige glanced down at the rosemary corsage on her wrist. Despite the dim lighting, it looked dark and healthy. That was a relief. That meant there was no Serenity in the air. Except… One had to be fairly close to cast an Imperius Curse without Serenity. So where was the spell caster?

Paige let the tumbler slip through her fingers again. It fell, splashing more water on the floor. She knelt to pick it up and in doing so used her elbow to knock the pitcher off the table as well causing even more water to splash on the floor. It was well known she had spent considerable time under the influence of the Imperius Curse while with Aunty D. Whoever cast this spell could not be certain an Imperius Curse would work or, if it did work at all, could not be certain it would work properly…

Paige stood. She picked up the pitcher, moved into the alcove, set the pitcher in the sink, and turned on the water. It was a logical thing to do after dropping the pitcher but Paige angled herself so her right side was to the wall where it couldn’t be seen from the outside. She slid her right hand down her leg, into her boot and drew her wand…

The aurors hadn’t searched Paige when they made their arrest. They had asked Paige for her wand and she had handed it to them willingly. Paige never mentioned she had a second wand and they never asked. It would have been bad form to point out their mistake with Rita there taking photos and Paige never bothered to mention it later. Besides, it wasn’t as if she were an actual criminal…

A Homonum Revelio spell would let Paige know immediately the location of the person casting the Imperius Curse, but it would also reveal to that unknown person that Paige had a wand… Paige was uncomfortably aware that, though armed, she was still trapped in a cell and vulnerable. So instead, Paige waved her wand and whispered a disillusionment charm. The running water from the tap insured she wouldn’t be heard. Paige watched her body fade and blend in with the surroundings. The relative invisibility made her feel safer. Paige slid her wand back into her boot. Then she removed the Celtic knot broach that held her spidersilk scarf in place. Paige couldn’t see the broach she held while the disillusionment spell was in effect, but she could feel. A simple twist brought about a familiar pricking sensation and, she hoped, a key, at least that’s what it felt like.

The urge to drink forgotten, Paige made her way very slowly to the door. The disillusionment spell would keep her hidden as long as she made no sudden moves. Paige moved as quietly as possible taking care to not step in the water, or disrupt anything in the room. When she reached the door, Paige quietly placed the key in the lock and turned… “Larry’s keys are always good,” Dewitt had told her. Would it be “good” here? There was a rumbling “clunk” and the door swung open with a loud creak. Paige waited. Would anyone come? No one did. More spells from an unseen person? Nothing. Paige slipped through the open door and moved silently down the hall.

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The alarm did not sound but it didn’t matter. Paige Crowley was very much aware that the person who cast that Imperius Curse was out there, somewhere, planning his next move… While remaining under the disillusionment charm, Paige quietly made her way, not to a regular exit, but to
Wizard Thomas’ office. No one would expect her to head that way. Paige placed her key in the lock of Thomas’ office door… The key turned and the door opened. Paige stepped inside quietly shutting the door behind her. Then she easily opened the secret door reserved for auror use only and swiftly left the Ministry…

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Chapter 40

Anthony Richards could not decide which was worse: that horrible photo showing Paige in manacles being led off to prison by Ministry Law Enforcement officials or the even larger one showing an empty cell room and the huge headline announcing Paige’s escape from the Ministry!

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“She didn’t do it!” declared Wycliff staunchly. “And if she did, it was with good reason!” Anthony Richards couldn’t understand why Wycliff had such unwavering belief in his sister-in-law, but she was nearly the only one! While they all applauded her escape, the Slytherins were certain it proved Paige’s guilt in Thackeray’s death.

“Not much we can do about it here,” declared Fitzpatrick who seemed equally convinced of Paige’s innocence.

“Then we do what we can,” stated Pilkington firmly, “which is watch Turay. She went out last night at midnight and was gone for nearly two hours!”

“Where’d she go?”

“Don’t know. She cast a disillusionment charm once she rounded the corner and we were unable to follow.”

“Where ever she went must be important if she cast a disillusionment charm,” mused Scorpius. “There’s got to be a way to follow her if she sneaks out again,” stated Anthony with frustration.

Fitzpatrick leaned back and said, “I think I know of something…”

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London Terrorized!

Proprietors up and down Diagon and Knockturn Alley have reported a rash of break-ins, theft and vandalism. (See Break-ins, page 4, Theft, page 5, Vandals! Page 2) At every location, witnesses report seeing a tall witch with long black hair nearby either before or after the incident… There is no need to wonder who that witch might be! Who else is an escaped fugitive with long black hair?

Who else has the Ministry foolishly released from custody? It is the Ministry’s fault these things have happened! It should take responsibility!

Daily Prophet

Anthony Richards folded up the Prophet and dropped the newspaper on the table in disgust. What was Paige doing? All the printed accounts clearly pointed to Paige as the culprit! They detailed more than the theft of a couple of cauldrons, food and potion supplies. They also described complete shop demolitions and wholesale inventory destruction! Paige always said that violence without purpose was senseless! Where was the purpose in what she had done? The destruction earned the goodwill of no one and would be remembered for years to come! All that hard work building up Tom’s business destroyed! No one would ever patronize his store after this! How could Paige do this to them?

“Come on!” he said to Scorpius. “Let’s get out of here!” He moved away from the table and headed for the doors when a shape blocked his way. Anthony looked up and saw O’Shea.
“McGonagall wants you!” she announced importantly. “The Ministry wants to see you
again,” she informed him. “That or she’s planning to sack you!”

“Sack?”

“Mum wrote!” O’Shea explained. “T’isn’t proper to call you an Assistant, hold you up as an
example to the rest of the school, when you snub the Ministry and your scores are so low! That
wouldn’t be happening if it were me…”

“Only because they haven’t figured out how you’re cheating yet!” stated Scorpius scornfully.
O’Shea sniffed. “They’re too stupid to!” she declared and moved off.

Anthony sighed and made his way to the stairs. O’Shea made it sound as if he were in big
trouble with McGonagall but it probably wasn’t like that at all.

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Anthony had been called up to McGonagall’s office right after Paige had escaped.

“This is Witch Bulstrode and Wizard Adrian Pucey of the Ministry of Magic,” began
McGonagall.

“They’d like a word with you.” They weren’t unknown to Anthony; he’d seen both around
the Ministry
during the summer while working with Pilkington. Bulstrode worked as a Ministry clerk and
Pucey
had a position with the Ministry of Magical Law Enforcement; they both wore the uniforms of
their
positions complete with the mandatory red carnations pinned on their lapels.

“Thank you,” Wizard Pucey said to McGonagall. “This shouldn’t take long. Is there a
room
where we can speak privately?”

“No,” replied McGonagall.

“No” asked Pucey raising an eyebrow in surprise. He looked at McGonagall for
further explanation
but none was forthcoming. Finally, Pucey cleared his throat and said, “Well, I suppose we
could complete
our business here. If you would give us a moment?” he looked expectantly at McGonagall.

“No,” refused McGonagall.

Pucey stepped forward “I don’t think you understand,” he said to McGonagall in a
lowered voice but one
still loud enough that Anthony could hear, “this would be much more successful if it was done
house-to
house, so to speak, Slytherin house…”

“Oh,” said McGonagall. “You wish to interview a Hogwarts student without a
Hogwarts representative
present?”

“One is not necessary,” Pucey explained smoothly. “We just want to ask a few
questions. It won’t
take long.”

“Actually, one is necessary,” countered McGonagall.

“One what?”

“A Hogwarts representative,” explained McGonagall. “Mr. Richards is a minor and
may not be
interviewed by anyone on Hogwarts grounds without an adult representative present.”

“Uh, that would be Witch Bulstrode,” stated Pucey. Bulstrode puffed at the added
responsibility.

“Witch Bulstrode is a Ministry employee,” reminded McGonagall. “Interviews done
on Hogwarts
need a Hogwarts employee to sit in,” she told him tartly. “Furthermore, Mr. Richards is my personal
Assistant! Anything you wish to ask Mr. Richards can be asked here, in front of me.”
“Very well,” Pucey said with a frown. “Have a seat,” he told Anthony. Anthony sat down in the
nearby chair. McGonagall and Bulstrode sat as well. Bulstrode set down her bag, pulled out a quill
and parchment and looked up expectantly.
“It’s about Mrs. Crowley,” he began, “we’re trying to find her… Have you any ideas?” He looked
at Anthony expectantly.
Anthony looked around the room before speaking. He noted the portrait of Snape on the wall
above the Headmistress. Like the rest of the portraits, he seemed to lean forward expectantly.
Anthony wondered if it were a sham; did Snape know where Paige was? Anthony drew a deep
breath. “No offense,” he began looking apologetically at McGonagall. “But I do not wish to speak without the consultation and
advice of my solicitor…”
“What?” exploded Pucey in surprise.
“Wizard Pilkington,” Anthony continued smoothly. Pilkington was Paige’s solicitor and Anthony
had worked with him over the summer. Anthony was certain Pilkington would not refuse. If he did,
Anthony was willing to wait for someone else who would agree to act as his solicitor.
“But,” sputtered Pucey, “I’m just asking some questions! You’re not in any legal trouble!”
“So you say,” agreed Anthony. “But that may change once you hear my answers. Better to start
with legal advice than make mistakes.” That’s what Wizard Pilkington said about some of the cases
they had worked together on during the summer.
“But—talk to him!” Pucey said to McGonagall.
“I could,” began McGonagall, “but I doubt it would do any good. I’m not a solicitor and Richards
is within his rights to request one. I can send the owl to Wizard Pilkington or will you?”
“But—”
“I think he’s in court!” interrupted Bulstrode in her gravelly voice.
“We can wait, or, perhaps you can come again when he’s free…” stated McGonagall smoothly.
Pucey and Bulstrode left. They returned the next day with Wizard Pilkington… They all met
again in McGonagall’s office. Despite Pilkington’s presence, McGonagall refused to leave.
Pilkington winked cheerfully at Anthony as they all sat down.
“Now, about Mrs. Crowley,” Pucey tried again, “we’re trying to find her…”
Anthony looked at Pilkington. He smiled and nodded back. “I don’t know where she is,”
Anthony answered.
Pucey did not seemed surprised. How could Anthony know of her whereabouts while at
Hogwarts? “Have you any idea where she might be?” Pucey continued.

Anthony looked again at Wizard Pilkington who again nodded encouragingly. Anthony turned his head and looked directly at Pucey. “I respectfully refuse to answer,” he stated firmly.

“What?!”

“I believe he refused to answer…” stated Pilkington.

“Yes, I heard that,” replied Pucey impatiently. “But he can’t refuse!”

“Yes, he can and he has,” persisted Pilkington. “Have you any other questions for Mr. Richards?”

“Uh…”

“Has Mrs. Crowley any friends that she might turn to for help?” questioned Bulstrode.

“Oh, yeah, does she have any friends that she might turn to for help?” repeated Pucey.

“I respectfully refuse to answer,” Anthony replied.

“What?! You can’t do that!” exploded Pucey.

“He can and he has,” stated McGonagall firmly. “Have you any other questions?”

“Uh…”

“Then I respectfully request you leave!” McGonagall stood. “This interview is over, Mr. Pucey.”

“You can’t do that!” protested Pucey.

“I can and I have,” replied McGonagall. She pointed her wand at the door causing it to open. “I have no intention of letting you try to browbeat my student further. We’re done now!” Bulstrode looked at Pucey and then slowly put her writing things back in her bag. She stood and straightened her uniform.

“Wait until Mr. Thomas hears about this!” threatened Pucey.

“Be sure to tell him that while I sympathize with his concerns,” McGonagall began, “I would never instruct Mr. Richards to behave contrary to the advice of his solicitor.”

“But…”

“I think leaving is an excellent idea,” put in Pilkington in a cheerful voice as he stood. Anthony rose as well. “If you wish Mr. Richards to say more, then you need to demonstrate his answers might be useful to your investigation and get a court order…” Pilkington informed the two. He stepped up close to Pucey and Bulstrode; they backed away from him turned and headed towards the door. Pilkington continued to move forward almost herding them out the door. “But between you and me,” Pilkington added in a confidential sounding voice as he walked, “I don’t think Mr. Richards knows of any place you might look for Mrs. Crowley where you haven’t already looked… or anything else of interest so a court order, should you get one, would be a waste of time… Good day,” Pilkington said cheerfully to McGonagall and Anthony as he exited. The door closed behind him.

Anthony grinned and turned to McGonagall. Paige had said McGonagall protected her students, Anthony couldn’t even begin to imagine how, until now… “That wa—”

“How dare you not cooperate with the Ministry!” scolded McGonagall sternly. “This little act of defiance could ruin all your future plans with the Ministry! I insist you write a letter of apology to Wizard Thomas immediately! Be sure to assure him that had you known anything of consequence you would have informed him promptly despite Wizard Pilkington’s advice!”

“Oh, yes, ma’am,” said Anthony meekly though he had never actually received any advice from Pilkington. He had merely supported Anthony’s wishes.
And I want that letter done before prefects Grufudd and Basu get up here to accompany you back to your dorm!” she added floating a quill and paper over to Anthony. Group traveling rules were still in effect. The huge door to her office opened and a tiny owl flew past and out. “Yes, ma’am,” answered Anthony. And he started writing. The final draft was fairly honest and positively dripped with regret passing even McGonagall’s critical eye. Anthony could afford the sincerity. He truly knew nothing about the whereabouts of Paige and guessed that the chances of any other Ministry officials returning were slim. They’d have to brave Pilkington to get that court order…

Anthony and Scorpius had just reached the stairs when a First, Geoffrey Bromadge, came out of the shadows. “T’sn’t McGonagall who wants to see you,” he whispered, “but your study group!” Study group! They couldn’t be “advisors” not without H2 and Anthony had had to say something to explain why he kept meeting with them… The notion that Anthony needed a “study group” to maintain his scores had amused the older Slytherins to no end.

“How do you know?” questioned Scorpius.

“Pilkington gave the note to Galina (meaning his sister in Ravenclaw) to give to me—O’Shea grabbed the note from me and said she’d deliver it “personally.” I asked Galina what the note said just in case O’Shea mis-read it,” answered Brombadge.

“Thanks,” said Anthony. The two headed up the stairs to the Room of Requirement instead of McGonagall’s office. Anthony wasn’t surprised O’Shea had lied. Word of Anthony’s defiance spread throughout Hogwarts like wildfire! While the Ravenclaws raised their eyes in surprise, the more conservative houses like Gryffindor and Hufflepuff openly disapproved. The action raised Anthony up high in Slytherin esteem, however. Even Professor Slughorn applauded the boldness of his move. All of which probably explained why O’Shea seemed to hate him even more, if possible.

“What are you going to do about O’Shea?” questioned Scorpius.

Anthony sighed. “Ignore her,” he answered.

“That hasn’t been working.”

“I know,” Anthony agreed, “she’s careful and makes sure there’s no witnesses.”

“There’s me,” Scorpius volunteered.

“We’re friends,” stated Anthony. “She’ll claim you back anything I say truth or not.”

“The Firsts?”

“They’re Firsts,” Anthony said dismissively. “You and I know they’re solid, but the professors will take O’Shea’s word over theirs any day…” They got off the seventh floor landing and started down the corridor.

“Which brings us back to what are you going to do about O’Shea?”

“I don’t know,” Anthony acknowledged. He could bring O’Shea up to the “Advisors,” but it really was his problem not theirs. “I’m open to suggestions.”

“No idea,” answered Scorpius promptly. “My best spells are illegal and anything less would only add fuel to the fire…”

Anthony paused when he reached the tutu painting. There was a small familiar smoky black door with a polished doorknob already in place waiting for them. “Then I guess I’ll worry about it later…” Anthony reached out, took hold of the doorknob and turned.

**********

“What are you doing here?” demanded Anthony Richards. Instead of a table with the usual
five chairs, there were six chairs and a sixth person as well!

“Waiting for you!” replied Albus Potter. He slid his chair back and stood up.

“Why?” asked Scorpius.

“I understand we have something you want.”

“I doubt that,” said Scorpius scornfully.

“Not talking to you,” said Potter bluntly and he turned his eyes to Anthony. “You do want it and it comes with a price,” he told Anthony.

“What?”

When Potter mentioned the word “price,” Anthony immediately began to appraise Potter as he did the vendors on Diagon Alley… Potter was as tall as Anthony. He was slim like his brother James and looked at Anthony with confidence meeting Anthony’s gaze squarely with clear green eyes. The eyes were the same colour as Wycliff’s but the similarity ended there. Anthony often saw fear and paranoia in Wycliff’s green eyes; there was none in Potter’s. Potter hadn’t stumbled once at H2; he taught all the students flying well enough to hold a quidditch match and not a single First fell during their flight from H2. Furthermore, Anthony had heard every First passed Madam Hooch’s broomstick obstacle course on the first try!

“I want in!” he told Anthony.

“In what?”

“Everything!”

“Fat chance!” muttered Scorpius disparagingly.

“In exchange for what?” asked Anthony. Potter was no longer the “clumsy nutter” of three years ago. In addition, Wycliff, Pilkington and Fitzpatrick were all watching Anthony intently. This was no joke.

“Tracking,” answered Potter confidently.

“Tracking?” questioned Scorpius.

“Yes. I understand you want to follow someone…”

“You?” laughed Scorpius. “This isn’t H2 where you can fly overhead and not be noticed!” he said referring to how they had all tracked Nellie.

“Exactly,” agreed Albus. “There are easier ways, ways we couldn’t use at H2.”

“Like what?” he challenged.

“That’ll cost.”

“Everything” is pretty vague,” began Anthony slowly. “Exactly what are you asking for and what will you provide?” That’s how Anthony would have dealt with one of the vendors… Potter seemed to stand straighter before speaking. “I want to know who you’re tracking and why,” he began. “And if that person is at Hogwarts I can tell you exactly where…”

“That’s easy enough,” stated Anthony. “We’re tracking Turay. Where is she?” he asked ignoring the second part of Potter’s demand.

“Why?”

“Tell us where she is, then we’ll discuss why,” countered Anthony.

“Can’t do that,” stated Potter firmly.

“Why?”

Potter drew a breath and let it out again. “I’d like to make a new proposal…”

“And what would that be?”

“One where we pool our information.”

“What kind of information?”

“Turay.”

“Turay?”

“Yes. You’re interested in Turay; we’re interested in Turay. It’s time we put it together…”

“That’s nothing about tracking,” observed Pilkington calmly.

“Do we have a deal?” asked Potter instead while looking directly at Anthony.

Anthony looked around the room. He knew them all well enough now to be able to read the expressions he saw or didn’t see. Scorpius was dubious. Wycliff and Fitzpatrick wanted this. But
Wycliff was a Potter; Fitzpatrick was nearly one, so of course they would. It could also mean they knew this would be useful. That left Pilkington; she didn’t seem opposed or she’d have said so. Personally, he wanted to know what was going on with Turay. Tracking her would help—except that wasn’t the deal being offered...

“Who is “we?” questioned Anthony stalling for time.
Potter shrugged. “Me, Lily, Rose, Hugo…”
“It’s all a scam!” declared Scorpius suddenly. “Wycliff’s a Potter! She’d have said something if you knew anything about Turay we didn’t already know!”
“Or can’t,” replied Potter evenly. “We have our secrets too. Well?”
Anthony studied their faces. Potter was serious and his manner implied he knew something worth sharing. Wycliff’s face was paler than usual and equally serious; Anthony didn’t think she could keep anything of importance about Turay secret from him. But Fitzpatrick, he clearly knew more than he was letting on or he wouldn’t have invited Potter to their meeting…

“Deal,” he decided aloud. “Now, where’s Turay?”
“No idea!” replied Potter promptly.
“What! But you said—”
“I said I could locate anyone at Hogwarts,” said Potter calmly, “and I can! Turay is not at Hogwarts!”

“Since when?”
“Don’t know that for sure, at least three weeks, maybe more—perhaps she never even boarded the Express.”
“Told you!” said Wycliff with satisfaction.
“You knew?” asked Potter turning to Wycliff with surprise. “How? The way Turey was bragging about how she could do Occlumency we thought for sure you didn’t…”
“And you didn’t tell me?” Wycliff accused.
“There really hasn’t been time,” he said apologetically. “What with class and all. We’ve only figured out as much as we know recently.”
“And how do you know?” asked Anthony.
“Just do,” said Potter firmly.
“Not good enough!” argued Anthony. “Share and share alike. That was the deal. Time you started sharing…” That wasn’t exactly the deal but it should be—especially when Potter knew things like that…

“Very well,” Potter said reluctantly. “But it had better be good!”

Potter reached into his robe and pulled out a fairly large worn square of parchment.
“What’s that?” questioned Scorpius.
“Excuse me,” said Potter. He drew his wand and turned his back on the group. Anthony heard the word “Muffliato,” then saw Potter tap the parchment lightly and all sorts of thin ink lines begin to spread like a spider’s web from the point that Potter’s wand had touched… Everyone bent over to look. Words appeared at the top. They read: Messrs. Mooney, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief Makers are proud to present, The Marauder’s Map.

To Anthony’s surprise, it seemed to be a map of Hogwarts with lots of tiny, what appeared to be ants moving about. But when he looked closer, they were letters, names! The word “Peeves” was moving down a hall, “McGonagall” was located in her office…

“Got this from father,” said Potter breaking the personal Muffliato spell he had cast. “And he got it from,” Potter frowned, “granddad, I think. No,” Potter corrected himself, “he said he got it from Uncle Fred and George… It lists everyone at Hogwarts and where they are… It’s how we knew we weren’t in Hogwarts in the fall—the professors were on it; we weren’t!”

And you didn’t say anything?” breathed Anthony. He could make out the names of Basu and
Febland moving towards the Entrance. And there was Mrs. Figg walking in the library!

“No point. By then Holly had proved we were prisoners which was a bit more important at the time…” Anthony watched the tiny dots move about the halls. “We pulled it out after you were attacked,” continued Potter while addressing Anthony. “Was hoping to see who the intruder was—but didn’t find anything unusual… The map doesn’t show everywhere,” he informed them.

“Oh?” Basu and Febland’s names vanished at the door as if they had gone outside the castle, most likely to the greenhouse.

“Not inside some of the dorms for example, or classrooms or the Room of Requirement… but most everywhere else.” Anthony could see only see the Gryffindor dorm marked… Using H2 logic, that meant the maker was probably Gryffindor. Hard to figure how the map showed all the different floors of Hogwarts at once but it managed to. “We kept looking, though…” Potter assured while they stared at all the names. “Took a while, but we finally found a name that didn’t belong.” Anthony looked up at Potter with interest.

“Who?”

Potter turned the map about and pointed to a name moving down the hall towards the library. “Regina Clarke.”

“Who?” Anthony looked closely at the moving name; sure enough, it said Regina Clarke.”

“Who is Regina Clarke?” questioned Scorpius as the name turned into the library and stopped.

“No idea,” answered Potter. “We’ve been trying to research the name and so far, haven’t found anything! But Regina’s there on the map and, like we did with Nellie, we’ve been following her around.”

“Have you?” questioned Anthony softly. Had he ever heard of a Regina Clarke before? No. Was Regina Clarke responsible for that attack on him? H2? Why? How did she relate to Turay and Thackeray?

“Yes.”

“What have you learned?” asked Pilkington.

“Nope! Your turn! Why do you think Turay isn’t Nadia?” Potter demanded. He looked at the group expectantly.

“Um,” began Anthony trying to think how to word things…

“She fancies Sorbi,” stated Pilkington before Anthony could reply.

“Sorbi?” said Potter blankly.

“Yes. Apparently Sorbi and Sabois are one and the same,” continued Pilkington in explanation. “Sabois was marketed exclusively at Hogwarts, though. If Nadia liked anything, it should have been Sabois but Holly says Nadia didn’t like Sabois… Therefore Turay cannot be Nadia. Sounds pretty flimsy, I know, but Holly is dead certain that no one who hated Sabois would ever change their mind about it later…”

Potter blinked. “Oh, well if Ho—”

“What makes you think Turay isn’t Nadia?” put in Anthony before they could digress on the merits of Sabois verses Sorbi…

“Because she isn’t,” answered Potter bluntly.

“How do you know?” questioned Scorpius.

“Because of Regina.”

“How does Regina relate to Turay?” questioned Pilkington.

“Like I said. We’ve been watching Regina on the map. Regina goes in and out of the Ravenclaw dorm,” Potter began, “and seemed to be following the Third years.”

“Seemed?”

“Yeah. We thought she must be was really good with the disillusionment charm because Lily and Hugo are both Thirds and they couldn’t spot her or figure out where she was in the classroom no matter how hard they looked. Then Lily remembered that Megan girl and thought maybe Regina Clarke was an Animagus, a small Animagus, but we couldn’t find an animal either. That’s when Hugo got the idea of cross-checking the names on the map with the student roster, in particular the third year students…”
“And?”
“There was no Turay. Except, we could all see Turay coming to meals and class every day. So Rose suggested we do some testing…”
“Testing?”
“Yeah, some chance encounters while watching what happened on the map…”
“And?”
“The person who looks like Nadia Turay and answers to Turay’s name, is actually Regina Clarke!” Potter took his wand and tapped the map while saying "Mischief managed." The map turned blank and looked again like a worn piece of parchment. “So how sure are you that Turay isn’t Turay?” he asked Wycliff in a conversational voice while returning the map to under his robes.
“I only ask because while I think Regina is maybe a twin or a good piece of transfiguration, Rose thinks Turay was always Regina and just changed her name to Turay.”
“Positive!” stated Wycliff firmly. “She’s been acting off since the first night at Hogwarts! The Sorbi was merely the last straw!”
“And why were you watching Turay then?” questioned Potter curiously. “I’m fairly certain she wasn’t talking about Sorbi that first night…”
Pilkington, Wycliff and Fitzpatrick looked at Anthony. “Uh,” he began as he decided what to say…
“Mrs. Thackeray is Nellie!” blurted Wycliff before Anthony could speak.
Potter’s eyes narrowed. “Nellie!” he exclaimed. “You certain?”
“Yeah,” agreed Anthony dryly.
“And you didn’t tell anyone?”
“My word against hers!” Anthony told him. “The proof is a photo I saw of Thackeray as a student in her album last summer. I knew I’d seen Nellie before but couldn’t place it until I saw Thackeray over the holidays. It’s her, I’m certain of it, but I can’t find it or any other photo of Thackeray as a student! If I spoke up without that photo Thackeray would deny everything and destroy the photo for sure!” Anthony stopped—realizing Thackeray was no longer alive to do any destroying… There was no mention in the Prophet about any photos in Thackeray’s house. Was the album still there? Had Paige found it? “Besides,” Anthony added aloud, “looking like Nellie is no proof Thackeray had anything to do with H2! And yes, I did tell someone and we investigated!”
“What did you find out?”
“That Thackeray said Nadia was a Dreamer and she couldn’t have had anything to do with H2 because she was at her house asleep the whole time!” answered Wycliff much to Anthony’s annoyance. Sharing did not mean blurt out everything! You always held back something...
“Except, maybe that wasn’t Nadia you and Paige found in that bed,” mused Wycliff aloud. “Perhaps it was Regina all along!”
“Dreamer?” questioned Potter. “What’s that?”
“Fill you in about that later,” said Fitzpatrick. “How certain are you of the name?”
“Positive,” answered Potter. “I wrote father and he said the map is accurate despite polyjuice, invisible cloaks and animagus forms but it doesn’t discriminate between Jr. and Senior of the same name… So, if Regina boarded the Express, where’s Nadia?”
“We don’t know,” said Wycliff mournfully.
“Thackeray called Nadia a “Dreamer,” began Pilkington. “What if Regina’s the Dreamer and not Nadia?”
“She never spoke when you saw her at Thackeray’s house,” reminded Scorpius. “Perhaps it was never Turay? Regina could have killed Turay, taken her place and then killed Thackeray,” speculated Scorpius. “And now she is hiding out at Hogwarts until she is legally able to get the inheritance.”
“A possible theory,” agreed Anthony, “if it’s true. But how do we prove it?”

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“Dean? Have you a minute?” Wizard Dean Thomas, head of Magical Law Enforcement, 
looked up into the green eyes of Harry Potter.

“Uh, yeah, a little,” he answered. Dean was really quite busy but he would always make time 
for Harry. Harry rarely came to the Ministry and it was usually with good purpose. “Come in,” 
invited Dean.

Harry came into Dean’s office, closed the door and sat down in the chair across from Dean’s 
desk. Shutting the door activated Dean’s room Muffleato charm to keep conversations in his office 
from being overheard. “How are you doing?” Harry asked in a concerned voice.

Dean took a deep breath before speaking. “How do you think?” he answered. “I’ve another 
meeting with Kingsley to report on how one of our aurors managed to escape from a holding cell we 
built that was guarded all night by aurors! And I still don’t know how it was done! Rita is having a 
field day on this! And then there are all the break-ins and destruction!” Dean continued in a rant. It 
felt good to unload.

“You surely don’t think Mrs. Crowley had anything to do with them do you?” questioned 
Harry.

“How can I not when every witness describes Mrs. Crowley down to a tee including her 
Celtic knot brooch, scarf and wrist corsage!” argued Dean. “Why does she persist in wearing such 
distinctive clothing?”

“But, she’s an auror!” protested Harry.

“I know that!” exploded Dean, “but an unbreakable vow doesn’t take into account an 
unbalanced mind!”

“What?”

“She swore to support the Ministry!” Dean began, “and If Mrs. Crowley thinks blowing up a 
vendor shop will help the Ministry, then her vows could require her to do just that!”

“Mrs. Crowley is not unbalanced,” argued Harry.

“That’s what I thought,” agreed Dean, “but that was before all those witness descriptions! 
And the escape! She left the cell!” Dean reminded Harry. “There was no reason for her to do that! 
Why would she do that?”

“You look tired,” Harry said sympathetically. “Have you gotten any rest?”

“Are you kidding?” questioned Dean. “Every night a new store gets robbed or vandalized. 
Everyone’s busy asking questions but no one answers! Someone out there somewhere knows 
something; we just have to find that person!”

“You need a break,” persisted Harry. “How about dinner tonight? Ginny would love to see 
you.”

“No,” refused Dean. “I don’t have time to socialize.”

“It’s just a dinner,” said Harry disarming. “You can always leave early…”

“No, some other time.”

“I insist. A break from the Ministry will do you good; perhaps give you a fresh perspective…” 
Dean shook his head regretfully. “I’m too busy.”

“I won’t take “no” for an answer,” Harry told Dean. “You need a break. I’ll get Kingsley to 
order it, if necessary!” he threatened.

“Well, if you put it that way,” Dean conceded. “It would be good to get away from the 
Ministry for a while.

“I do. Six o’clock?”

Dean nodded reluctantly.

“Good.” Harry stood. “I know you’re busy,” he added, “so I won’t take up any more of your 
time. But if you’re not at my house at six, I’ll come back and personally escort you to my home!” 
Harry promised. “See you later.”
Wizard Dean Thomas, head of Magical Law Enforcement knocked on Harry Potter’s front door promptly at six pm. The dinner had been a good excuse to get away from the Ministry, more importantly to get away from one more interview with Rita! Rita’s malicious questions were such a trial!

The door opened. Harry’s house elf Kreacher, wearing a sparkling white pillowcase, stood on the other side. “Welcome Mr. Thomas,” he said to Dean. “If you would come in,” Kreacher invited stepping aside to let Dean enter. Usually, Kreacher was a rather grim elf, but today he looked almost happy to see Dean. Kreacher closed the heavy door. “May I take your robes?” he offered holding out his arm. “Uh, yeah,” said Dean shedding his outdoor clothing and handing them to Kreacher. Kreacher draped the robes neatly on his arm and the robes suddenly vanished, presumably to the wardrobe closet. “If you will follow me,” said Kreacher politely. He turned and started walking towards the parlor. Dean followed.

The huge portrait of Mrs Black looked down disapprovingly at Dean as he passed. “What are you doing here?” she demanded imperiously. “This is no place for your kind!”

Dean ignored her. Usually Harry kept the portrait covered over with a heavy curtain. Dean wondered why it had been opened...

“Dean! It’s so good to see you!” greeted Ginny Potter. Ginny looked elegant in a shimmery mauve evening gown. Harry was dressed in a black suit with a black bow tie.

“This was a black tie affair?” asked Dean dismayed. He was still wearing his Ministry uniform having just left the Ministry.

“Not really,” informed Harry. “It’s just that Kreacher likes to serve fancy meals when we, ah, have company…”

“Some wine?” offered Kreacher holding a tray with three glasses filled to the brim with dark red liquid.

“Uh, yeah,” said Dean taking a glass. Ginny and Harry took the other glasses. Dean took a sip and recognized the very special flavour of elf-made wine. It was good stuff. The best. Dean was pleased to think Harry thought enough of Dean to share elf-made wine with him. Then Dean remembered the last time he had shared elf-made wine with Harry… That was when Harry had told him about Sir and that memory spell in the Prophet… Dean drained the glass. “What’s going on?” he asked suspiciously while noting Kreacher had refilled his glass without asking.

“Just dinner,” assured Harry after taking a sip from his glass. “Is dinner ready?” he asked Kreacher.

“Yes, sir,” came the response.

“Then I suggest we begin as your time is limited…” Wineglass in hand, Harry started walking to the dining room. Dean and Ginny did the same. “Did I mention we were entertaining a house guest?” Harry asked in a casual sounding voice.

“No,” answered Dean, again suspicious. “Who?” There was no need for a reply. Dean could already see the guest seated at the table; black hair, black eyes, imperious stare, there was no mistaking Paige Crowley!

The glass slipped from his fingers shattering on the floor spilling wine everywhere as Dean reached for his wand. Suddenly he felt a firm grip on his wrist pulling his arm out and away wrecking his aim.

“She’s not armed!” Harry said firmly while releasing his hold on Dean. “I made sure as soon as we realized she was here.”

“What?”

“And I checked for a second wand too,” Harry added, “just in case.”

“Second wand?” thought Dean blankly. “Did Paige carry a second wand? Since when? Why did Harry think she might? They hadn’t asked for a second wand when they took her in
What’s going on?!!” Dean demanded aloud while controlling the rage and pain he felt with difficulty. How could Harry have betrayed him so!

“Mrs. Crowley apparently knocked on our door a few nights ago,” began Harry. “Kreacher answered and let her in much as he did for you tonight—visitor privileges, you see.

“Apparently?”

“Yes, well, it was during the wee hours of the morning and, rather than disturb us, Kreacher fixed Mrs. Crowley a bite to eat and led her upstairs to the guest room to sleep. We didn’t even know Mrs. Crowley was in the mansion until she came down for breakfast in the morning, while I was reading in the Prophet about her escape,” Harry finished. “I’d be angry at Kreacher but I got the impression he acted as he did under the supervision of Mrs. Black…” he concluded.

“And you didn’t tell me?” questioned Dean angrily.

“You were, um, busy,” Harry replied.

“Busy?” stormed Dean. “Yes! I was busy! Busy looking for her! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was going to tell you the next day after things had settled a bit,” began Harry, “but then there was that robbery…”

“Yeah, the one that she committed!” exploded Dean. “How could you just let her—”

“I didn’t,” interrupted Harry coldly. “She’s been here the whole time.”

“That can’t be!” denied Dean. “I’ve witnesses, credible witnesses!”

“Kreacher?” stated Harry.

“Yes, sir?”

“What did I order you to do as soon as I learned Mrs. Crowley was in our mansion?”

“To not let Mrs. Crowley leave the mansion for any reason,” Kreacher answered promptly.

“And did she?”

“No sir!” Kreacher answered proudly. “Kreacher keeps watch night and day!”

“Mrs. Crowley has been here ever since the escape,” informed Harry. “Mostly playing wizard chess with Ginny…”

“I don’t care!” stormed Dean. “You didn’t tell me! You should have told me! I would have,” stated Harry, “but then I realized the witnesses were describing Paige as the thief! So I left.”

“You left?” questioned Dean in disbelief.

“Yeah. After Sir, I’m a little bit paranoid about eyes at the Ministry that shouldn’t be there. All right, a lot paranoid,” confessed Harry. “If someone saw me come to you right after a big thing like Paige’s escape, someone might have made connections I didn’t want made.”

“Connections?”

“Yeah. It occurred to me it might be safer to wait some more…”

“Safer?” questioned Dean. “She was safe in the holding cell!” A new thought occurred. “Did you help her escape?”

“Of course not!” assured Harry.

“So why did she leave?” Dean demanded.

“Uh, perhaps you could ask her yourself…” He nodded towards the figure sitting at the table listening to their exchange… Dean had forgotten Paige was even there!

“Over dinner,” said Ginny firmly before Dean could respond. “I’m hungry. We’re all hungry. Things will look much better on a full stomach. Why don’t you put that wand away for now,” she suggested. “You can always take Mrs. Crowley in later, after dinner…”

“Uh.”

Ginny took a firm hold of Dean’s elbow and propelled him forward to the dining chairs. Kreacher slid a chair out and Dean sat down heavily in it. A few minutes later Kreacher was happily serving the first course, onion soup…

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And like that, the argument had ended. Thomas again spoke to Potter as if they were friends;
he looked and acted sincere! Mrs. Paige Brenna Crowley doubted Thomas could lie convincingly enough to fool her had he still harbored resentment. The change in behaviour amazed Paige considering the anger she had seen. Was that how it was between Gryffindors? Quick to anger and quick to forgive and forget? Or were there stronger ties that bound Potter and Thomas? Paige doubted she could forgive and forget so easily in similar circumstances.

As they ate, Paige told the tale of her escape. She included sensing the Imperius Curse and why she felt the need to leave. Though Thomas bristled at her having a second wand, he could not deny Paige had done the right thing. Paige described using a disillusionment spell with her second wand and sneaking out, as Potter had already mentioned it. Potter, of course, had known Paige carried a second wand after their experiences with Sir. Paige omitted the bit with the brooch, saying instead the door had been invitingly left open. That lie could only be corrected by the person who had cast the Imperius Curse. Once that person was found and if that person mentioned the locked door, Paige could always say she omitted the brooch because she didn’t want Larry the Locksmith to get into trouble... Paige finished by telling them she used disillusionment charm to sneak out never mentioning which exit she had used.

There were some things Paige learned from the conversation she did not already know. The water had been cleaned up! The aurors had found no water on the floor! The person casting the Imperius Curse must have cleaned up after she had left. Why? Had it been doctored somehow? Also, the auror guards swore they had been there the whole time; they never remembered leaving! Thomas was most concerned to learn of their absence. What caused them to leave? Why did they forget? Had the Imperius Curse been cast on more than Paige? Thomas seemed most upset at this and vowed to find a way to guard against it in the future.

During dessert the conversation moved on to other topics. “Have you made any progress on Mrs. Thackeray’s murder?” Potter asked in a conversational voice.

Thomas stiffened. “You know I can’t talk about that!”

“Of course not,” agreed Potter. “But I was hoping one of your aurors would be free enough to look into this.” Potter reached into his pocket, pulled out a folded piece of parchment and handed it to Thomas.

Thomas unfolded the parchment and looked at it. “Regina Clarke?” he questioned. “Who is that?”

“That’s what I was hoping your aurors could find out,” answered Potter.

“Why?”

“Because Regina Clarke has been walking the halls of Hogwarts disguised as Nadia Turay!”

“What? Says who?”

“Says the Marauder’s Map.”

“Marauder’s Map? What’s that?” questioned Paige silently.

“You don’t say!” mused Thomas. “You tell McGonagall?”

“Course,” answered Potter promptly. “Or, rather, Albus did. Couldn’t tell her the source though. Doesn’t matter; McGonagall needs more than a name to take action. Luna would like some solid evidence to get her out of the dorms; doesn’t like the idea of a murderer loose with the other students. Peace wards can go only so far.”

“Murderer?” questioned Thomas. “This Regina Clark may be many things, but she did not kill Thackeray! She was at Hogwarts at the time.”

“Was she?” questioned Potter. “No owl sent that letter accusing Paige!”

“I know,” admitted Thomas, “but there are other ways to get messages into Hogwarts and the letter is definitely in Thackeray’s handwriting! We checked and double checked it!”

“And what about Turay?”

“What about her?”

“She’s missing and Regina is walking about using her name!”

“Where’s your proof?” demanded Thomas. “A few off comments does not a new person make. Regina Clarke could just reflect a childhood name change…”

“Holly says—”
“That’s not good enough!” interrupted Thomas. “You think we didn’t check out Holly’s tip first thing after finding Thackeray’s body? We couldn’t find anything amiss and nothing unusual about Turay’s memories! And yes, she does like Sorbi but so does the rest of the wizard community, myself included! The comment won’t convince anyone of anything in court! They won’t want to hear how the two drinks were one and the same or that they were all scammed by Sir! Aside from that, there’s no polyjuice or Imperius Curse involved! And if she’s transfigured or a metamorphmangus in Turay’s shape, then she’s very, very convincing. Now, I’ll have the aurors research Regina Clarke. And in the meantime, if you really think Turay, uh, Clarke is involved in Thackeray’s death, then get me something substantial that can be used in a court!”

“She wasn’t in the dorm the night of Paige’s escape,” informed Potter.

“But was she at the Ministry or out chasing centaurs?” retorted Thomas. “I need more!”

“You waste the evening discussing court evidence before you’ve got someone to try,” observed Paige disdainfully. “Your time would be better spent catching the murderer!”

“Have you something in mind?”

“Perhaps…”
Chapter 42

The screech owl swooped silently in and dropped off a huge package in front of Head boy and Prefect Jeremy Corner Saturday morning. The Ravenclaws, including Nadia Turay, were all in the Great Hall finishing breakfast.

“What’s that?” questioned prefect Alessa Moore (R6).

“Beats me,” answered Jeremy. He removed the small scroll that came with the package, untied the string, unrolled the scroll and read the message. “It’s a birthday gift from my Aunt Essie!” he announced.

“Really?” questioned Leila Pilkington (R6). “I didn’t know it was your birthday.”

“T’isn’t,” affirmed Jeremy. “My Aunt Essie, well, she tends to get her dates all muddled and sends me things when she thinks of it…”

“So, what’s in it?” questioned Daren Azi (R3) eagerly.

Jeremy tore the paper off the box. “Chocolates, I think,” he answered while staring dubiously at the label on the festive looking box.

“Chocolates!” exclaimed Blaize Ashcroft (R2) excitedly. “What kind?”

“Uh, the label says *Leaky Chocolates*.”

“Leaky Chocolates? Never heard of them.”

“The note says they’re something new,” Jeremy informed the group. “Something put out by the Leaky Caludron.” He noted a small Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes stamp in the corner.

“Really?” said Nikita Kakkar (R7). “What kinds?”

Jeremy flipped the box over and read the back aloud. “Toad in the hole, fish and chips, bangers, lamb stew, fisherman’s pie, butterbeer, elderberry wine, Gillywater, firewhiskey, pumpkin fizz, and exploding lemonade.”

“Sounds promising!” said Michael Goldstein (R6).

“Can I try one?” asked Donovan Cormac (R5).

“Sure,” said Jeremy obligingly. He opened the box revealing several neat rows of colourfully decorated light and dark pieces of chocolate. They looked fairly small, easy to pop one into his mouth whole. Jeremy selected a dark piece with a blue squiggle on top and passed the box to Donovan. He took one with something red on top.

“May I?” questioned Jha Onella (R1) who sat next to Donovan.

“Sure!” agreed Jeremy affably. There were lots of chocolates in the box. “Looks like there’s enough for all!” he observed aloud. “Anyone else?” he offered. Jeremy popped his piece of chocolate into his mouth and began to chew as the box was passed about the table. Soon everyone, including Turay, had taken a chocolate.

The smooth rich flavor of chocolate gave way to something creamy and … fishy? Yeech! Jeremy swallowed down his piece with difficulty while suppressing the urge to gag or spit it out. Then he looked around the table for other responses. There were an assortment of expressions, some pleased, others not.

Jeremy swallowed again to clear his throat. “I think I got the fisherman’s pie,” he said to start the conversation. “Not a good combination.”

“Lamb stew wasn’t too bad,” observed Leila Pilkington aloud.

Donovan coughed. Black smoke spewed out of his mouth. Several tongues of flames followed. “Wow!” was all he could manage to say. Soon the other students were sharing their experiences as well… Jeremy looked over at Turay. She hadn’t spoken but there was a half smile on her face. “What’d you get Turay?” he inquired in a casual sounding voice.


The box of chocolates had made it back to Jeremy. “More?” he offered passing the box around again starting with Turay… She took another chocolate without hesitation selecting one with a green and yellow squiggle on top and passed the box along. But it wasn’t Turay who popped
the chocolate into her mouth. Nadia Turay was too young to drink alcohol. The expression Jeremy saw should have been of one who tried something new and liked it, not of one remembering a good flavour. Of course, Mrs. Thackeray might have let Nadia try the wine at their home, but somehow Jeremy didn’t think so.

Besides, by now, all the Ravenclaws had realized Turay was not Turay. They didn’t know who she was, Regina Clarke was as good a name as any, but they all mourned the loss of their friend and Housemate Nadia Turay.

The person who looked like Nadia Turay had alienated all of Nadia’s friends the first night by choosing to sleep in the dorms. Her friends wondered why. When the Ravenclaws realized this same person chose to sleep in the “wrong” bed, they used their “sleeping” time outside the dorms to ponder the reason for that as well. The group finally decided to say nothing and watch instead. It was possible that the person who looked like Nadia Turay realized she was under constant observation, but she never let on. When Leila reported that Richards wanted Turay watched as well, the group gathered to decide what information they wanted Leila to pass on and when.

The results of their own observations were disconcerting. “Turay,” was clearly familiar with castle and the class curriculum identifying her as a person who attended or had attended Hogwarts. She had no problem answering the Ravenclaw password riddle and getting into the dorm confirming high intelligence. But “Turay” didn’t know other things that Nadia should have known such as the owner of brushes and jewelry left on the counter, or the Ravenclaw passageway. She did not seem to notice or did not correct the simple memory tests the Ravenclaws devised (“Like my new dress?” when the dress wasn’t new at all. “May I borrow your book again?” when that particular book had never before been lent out…) This indicated severe memory gaps specifically related to the Ravenclaws.

Despite being a key participant in observing and thwarting Slytherin activities the previous year, “Turay” did not seem to see the Slytherin harassment that others saw occurring around her. Or, she ignored it. While the other Ravenclaws immediately set about working with the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors to undo Slytherin harassment the moment they spotted it, “Turay” neither took part in spotting or stopping it. It was possible “Turay” didn’t even realize the rest of the Houses were working against the Slytherins. But the Ravenclaws didn’t ask. They would not inform “Turay” of what she should have already known.

Jeremy was not surprised when Professor Lovegood called the Ravenclaw prefects together to inform them of Holly’s assertion that “Turay was not Turay;” her words were mere confirmation of what they already suspected.

“Turay” had already been a topic of discussion for the auror students as well. Professor Lovegood had charged the auror students with learning who she was and finding ways to keep the other students safe. Jeremy had dutifully brainstormed with the other students and presented their ideas to Professor Lovegood but the Ravenclaws had already been actively involved in creating dorm protection. Peace wards had been installed throughout especially around the bed Regina slept in. It was impossible for Regina to engage in an act of violence while in the dorms.

“Thirds?” Jeremy inquired of the group while holding out his box of chocolates enticingly. Everyone shook their heads. Jeremy collected the box, replaced the lid and tucked it into his bag.

“By the way,” said Leila in a bored tone, “Wycliff’s doing a full intruder search of the Castle today.”

Everyone groaned, everyone but Clarke. “What? What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Wycliff’s doing a full intruder search,” repeated Galina Bromadge (R1) as if that explained everything. It didn’t. Holly had never actually done a “full intruder search” of the castle before but Clarke didn’t know that and the other Ravenclaws had no intention of enlightening her otherwise. The idea had been discussed at H2, of course, but discarded on the grounds that a kidnapper had too much opportunity to move from place to place during the search rendering the search results useless.

“Who’s for going outside and watching the quidditch practice with me?” asked Galina. As former H2 Chaser, Galina was rather disappointed to learn she wasn’t old enough to be included on a proper Quidditch team.
Several students chorused “Me!” and started gathering up their things.
“I’ve got to go to the dorms and get my books first,” announced Alessa. “Anyone else headed that way?”

“So?” persisted Clarke. “What’s wrong with a search?”
The older students sighed loudly with impatience and exasperation.
“Perhaps you’ve noticed that Wycliff’s wand is a little different,” began Dylan Pilkington (3R) in explanation.
“It’s stinky!” supplied Jha energetically. Jha had actually confided in Jeremy he liked the scent and wondered if he could get a wand like Wycliff’s but that would not serve their purposes now.
“She’s going through the whole castle using the *Homonum Revelio* spell,” continued Leila. Even though it had never been done before, given what had occurred at the duel last year, it was easy to imagine what would happen.
“The last time she did a castle search, we had to open all the windows to get the eucalyptus cloud out!” filled in Pavan Chopra (R4.)

“Why?” questioned Clarke.
“Why what?”
“Why is she doing it?”
“She’s looking for the intruder, of course,” answered Lelia.
“Why don’t they stop her?”
“Why should they?” argued Nikita. “Probably won’t turn up anything, but it can’t hurt.”
“But——”
“Wycliff’s got … issues,” Leila added explaining. “It’s easier to let her do the search than argue with her.”

*Never argue with your Healer,* chimed in Winston D’Airelle in a pious tone.

“She’s not your Healer!” Clarke said with disgust.
“She is too!” insisted Galena.
“Old habits die hard,” replied Leila with a shrug.
“The Firsts have never actually met Madam Pomfrey,” reminded Jeremy mildly.
“At any rate, I don’t want to be inside while she’s searching!” finished Blaize. “Coming?” she invited.

“No,” decided Clarke aloud. “I’m going to Hogsmeade.”

“With whom?” asked Alessa bluntly. As prefect, she had a right to ask and a responsibility to make sure the Ravenclaw students followed the Intruder Alert rules.
“I don’t need a companion to go to Hogsmeade,” denied Clarke with a toss of her head.
“You do to get out of Hogwarts,” reminded Jeremy sternly.
“I’ll go with her,” volunteered Nikita. “I can always do some shopping….”

“Thanks,” said Alessa. If Nikita hadn’t volunteered, Alessa would have to go or appoint someone else to. They didn’t want Clarke traveling around Hogwarts alone possibly creating mischief. Unfortunately, there was no official excuse they could use to do the same at Hogsmeade.
“I don’t need a babysitter!” protested Clarke.

“Rules are rules!” stated Jeremy firmly. Clarke’s desire to bypass the rules was a sure indication she was probably a Slytherin; they liked to slide around the rules… So far the aurors had not found the name in any school records. Operating on the premise that Clarke was a very smart Slytherin, the Ravenclaws had been making comments in front of her that agreed with limited Slytherin preconceptions.


“Oh?” she asked without concern. “Did he say why?”

“Just that something came up, something important.”

Leila nodded. Fitzpatrick and Potter moved away. Jeremy was glad the Potters had finally teamed up with the Advisors. The Potters were resourceful with access to some very useful magic. Jeremy suspected the name “Regina Clark” had come from the Potters. At least the name had been...
first introduced after the Potter/Advisor meeting...

As an auror student, one of the things Jeremy was asked to do was to look at the rest of the student population with an eye for potential auror candidates. Both Fitzpatrick and Leila were excellent candidates. They were incredibly smart without the need for public acclaim. But Jeremy wasn’t sure either would accept the service requirements of an auror. That unbreakable vow dissuaded lots of potential candidates. Potter would have been a good candidate too, but James was already entering the field. The Ministry discouraged having more than one auror in a family. The risk was too great.


Clarke bristled at being told what to do but stood as well. The three started walking towards the door.

Jeremy put the chocolates away and made his way to the door. He reached the entry and looked out. The entryway was already cloudy and filled with the scent of eucalyptus. Several Slytherins coming up from the dungeons were loudly complaining despite the bubbles around their heads. Jeremy ignored them and went to the stairway. One of his auror classmates was waiting for him. The two made their way up to Professor Lovegood’s office.

They reached Professor Lovegood’s office. Jeremy knocked once on the door and then entered. Professor Lovegood was lounging in a silk hammock strung up from the ceiling. She looked down from what she was reading, no doubt looking for something about the elusive Regina Clarke. Professor Lovegood looked up. “Did she eat one?” she asked in a serene voice.

“Two,” answered Jeremy. “She liked the elderberry wine…” He reached into his bag, pulled out the Leaky Chocolate box and placed it on her carved olivewood desk next to a bag labeled Leaky Niblets.

“Make sure everyone has a Niblet within the hour,” Professor Lovegood instructed.

Jeremy nodded. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a heavy ornate gold pocket watch and checked the time. Then he picked up the bag. It would be easy enough to get the Niblets to the Ravenclaws at Hogwarts; they were all at the pitch watching the practice. That left Nikita and Leila. It would be close, but he was certain he could get to them within the hour; he knew where they would be.

**********

Leila Pilkington stood outside the Hogwarts castle with Clarke and Nikita. An empty carriage rolled up. Leila, Clarke and Nikita stepped up. “Oh dear,” exclaimed Nikita. “I forgot my money! I can’t shop that way! You go on without me!” she told Leila and Clarke. “If I hurry, I can catch up with Moore. They’ll stay with me until I get a later carriage.” Nikita ducked away leaving Leia alone with Clarke.

Several Slytherins strode up as Leila were getting in the carriage. Richards, wearing his Headmistress’ Assistant badge and robes stepped in view flanked by Basu, Corwin and Adderson. There was space for them in the carriage but Richards took one look at Clarke and said loudly: “We can wait for the next one.”

“Crowley killed my grandmother!” Clarke exclaimed righteously as she settled herself in the carriage. “Your brother should have never married her!”

“That letter is a forgery!” Richards informed her confidently. “Paige’ll be cleared soon, once I get the proof!”

“In your dreams!” promised Clarke as the carriage rolled off.

**********

They’ve left! Pass the word!”

**********
Leila fished around in her bag for a book to read. “That letter is real!” declared Clarke suddenly. “There’s no way he has proof otherwise!”

“Mmm,” said Leila vaguely as she opened her book. “You do believe me,” Clarke persisted.

Leila looked up from her book. The Ravenclaws had stood supportively behind Clarke in public ever since Mrs. Thackeray had died. However, they had not discussed that letter or Clarke’s accusation of Crowley. “I believe Mrs. Thackeray wrote that letter,” Leila said carefully. “The Ministry has confirmed that it is her handwriting...”

Clarke leaned back clearly relieved. Then she looked at Leila. “But you believe Crowley didn’t do it don’t you?”

“I would have to see all the evidence before making a decision,” replied Leila neutrally. “But, the bottle!”

“The Prophet sells papers,” reminded Leila, “and reports things with that in mind.”

“And all those other things she’s done?”

“Has she?” questioned Leila. “I need to see the evidence on that as well.” Leila looked back down at her book easily finding her place.

After a while, Clarke spoke again. “What exactly is it you do in that study group you go to?”

“Study.”

“What?”

“Whatever is needed,” Leila answered vaguely and turned a page. “Like you!” But Leila didn’t say that aloud.

“Why? You’re a Ravenclaw! You don’t need them!”

“They need me.”

“But, a Hufflepuff? Surely you have better things to do with your time.”

“No.” Leila returned her attention to her book turning another page. And another page, and another, and another. Actually, Leila couldn’t remember what she had just read. She suddenly realized she was having a difficult time concentrating. Instead of reading, Leila really wanted to tell Clarke all about their conversations during the “study group” meetings. It was with difficulty that she kept silent. It would make her so happy to tell Clarke everyth—happy? Happy!!!? Clarke was trying to cast an Imperius Curse! No, she was casting the curse! Leila ignored the urges. Instead, she resolutely kept her eyes fixed on her book and pretended to read. Imperius Curses were difficult to cast. Let Clarke think her spell failed; well, it had... But not the way Clarke would have expected.

The Slytherin food poisoning incident had been one of their direst times at H2. While Jeremy and Holly sat next to Richards trying to keep him alive, Albus Potter kept vigil by Scorpius Malfoy’s bed. Though the food poisoning situation was of their own (Slytherin) making, it made Potter keenly aware of what a kidnapper could have done, could still do and the strings he could pull as master puppeteer in total control of their lives. A single word or action by the wrong person (or right one, depending on your point of view,) could destroy them all. They needed to protect themselves...

Potter thought long and hard of what they could do. Was Malfoy the right person to help? Could he do it; could he be trusted? Potter finally decided their overall need outweighed his personal prejudices and concerns. And so began a very secret training program, one never mentioned in the debriefings after their return from H2. Their H2 leaders, the advisors, teachers and prefects—one at a time were pulled aside and taught how to resist the Imperius Curse.

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Merely casting the curse should have sent Clarke to Azkaban. Unfortunately, proving it was another matter. Leila had sat in on Umbridge’s trial. (Father had been brilliant!) It had taken a lot of evidence from numerous sources to convict Umbridge. In this particular situation, it would be Leila’s word against Clarke’s. Clarke was an orphan with no living relatives and a murdered grandmother. That alone would gain the sympathy of the jury. She would claim youth and inexperience in her defense and would win. Leila resolved to report what happened to Jeremy when she next saw him. He’d know what to do...

The carriage rolled to a stop at the Hogsmeade platform. It was a narrow wooden platform...
that was elevated to make it easier to get in and out of the carriages. There was with a covered bench on one side where students could wait during bad weather and stairs on the other. The urge to talk stopped. Leila closed her book and put it away with relief. “Where do you want to go first?” she asked Clarke politely.

For the briefest instant, Leila could have sworn she saw an expression of anger flash across Clarke’s face. Then the expression cleared. “I can manage on my own,” Clarke said with a toss of her head.

“Whatever,” Leila said and she got out of the carriage.

“Pilkington!”
Leila looked up and saw Malfoy running up to her. He had a small scroll clutched tightly in one hand.

“What’s Richards?” Malfoy asked breathlessly as he climbed the platform stairs.

“Next carriage,” Leila assured. She stepped past Malfoy, down the platform and headed towards Hogsmeade.

Behind her Leila heard, Malfoy say, “What are you hanging around for, Turay? Beat it!”
Leila paused and turned. Seriously? “Don’t bother trying anything,” Leila advised loudly. “There are witnesses,” she reminded. It sounded as if she was warning Malfoy, but her words were mostly for Clarke. With the two of them alone at the station, it would be a tremendous temptation for Clarke to cast another Imperius Curse to find out the contents of that scroll in Malfoy’s hand. Perhaps she had already tried. Her efforts would have failed; Malfoy was an advisor and could also resist the effects of an Imperius Curse. If Clarke did try to curse him, Malfoy would have known exactly what she was doing and might wish to retaliate. He surely would not attempt that today…

“Come on, Turay,” Leila added to further remove temptation. “There are more Slytherins coming in the next carriage…”

“I’m not afraid!” Clarke announced proudly as she reluctantly stepped away from Malfoy, went down the stairs and caught up with Leila.

Leila mentally rolled her eyes. “Neither are they,” she said aloud. Leila had thought Clarke was a Slytherin but now considered revising her opinion; even they weren’t that stupid.

“Where do you wish to shop?” Leila asked as they reached the first of the tiny businesses.

“Alone!” said Clarke firmly. “Traveling around in groups all the time is really getting on my nerves!” She stepped quickly into the building across the street to emphasize her point. Leila sighed and walked down the street, turned the corner and entered the Hogshead. Leila ignored the animal stench and walked over to the corner booth. Jeremy was sitting with a bottle of butterbeer in front of him waiting. Leila slid into a chair across from him. “Here,” Jeremy said handing her a Nibblet. “Where is she?”

“Three Broomsticks,” answered Leila. “Like usual.” She popped the Nibblet into her mouth. It was both crunchy and sweet with a touch of cayenne.

“I’ll let them know,” said Jeremy.

“How much time do we have?” questioned Leila.

Jeremy pulled out his pocket watch. “Thirteen minutes,” he told her.

“That should be enough time.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy agreed. “Let’s hope this works.”

***********

Regina Clarke stepped into the Three Broomsticks Inn. Scarcely had the door behind her closed, than four students came out of the back. They moved forward like a wall towards Regina making her step aside to let them pass. Regina bit back an angry retort with difficulty scarcely noticing their words as they passed.

“You’re right!” spoke Harriet Dempsey (H4.) “It is like the ones at the Ministry!”

Regina’s anger faded as she listened with more interest.

“Just like,” confirmed Jordon Vaughn (G5) “Dad took me there for a visit once.”
“Any idea who did it or why?” asked Lily Potter (G4.)

“Some pervert, considering where it ends up,” answered Janet Turner (H4) as she opened the door. The other three laughed in agreement as the four continued on out.

Regina ordered a butterbeer and then selected a seat where she could watch the street. After a few minutes Malfoy, Richards and the other Slytherins walked into view. Malfoy and Richards split off. Regina saw Richards slip something into his pocket, most likely the scroll Malfoy had held earlier. Then the door to the Three Broomsticks opened and the two entered. They looked around, noted Regina, and selected seats on the opposite side of the room.

A waitress moved down the aisle in Richards’ direction carrying a tray of food, two bowls and two mugs. Regina quietly drew her wand and pointed it at the waitress. The waitress reached Richards and continued moving past. Suddenly she tripped! The tray slid from her hand and the food splashed onto Richards. Regina quickly cast a disillusionment charm on herself while everyone’s attention was on Richards.

“Imbecile!” snarled Richards as he stood and surveyed the damage.

“I’m terribly sorry!” exclaimed the waitress as Regina stood.

“I don’t know what come over me. Let me help you clean up!” the waitress added drawing her wand.

“Forget it!” stormed Richards while shoving her wand aside. “I don’t need any more help from you! I can do it myself! Come on!” he told Malfoy and the two marched down the aisle.

Abruptly Regina’s stomach gave a lurch. Heedless of her nearly invisible state, Regina ran for the W.C pushing aside chairs and sliding in front of Richards in her haste. She opened the back door and raced through barely making it to the toilet in time…

Eventually her stomach stopped heaving. Regina grabbed some tissue and wiped off her lips. She stood and flushed the toilet. Then Regina went to the sink and splashed water on her face. Regina couldn’t imagine what had set her off and cursed her bad luck to have missed her chance to get near Richards. As she checked her appearance in the mirror, Regina saw something glint behind her. It looked like a slender, near invisible thread dangling down from the ceiling into the other stall.

Regina turned and walked into the other stall. A closer examination of the glittering thread revealed it was not a thread at all, but a goblin chain! A goblin chain hanging down from the ceiling barely noticeable even when she knew it was there. Why?

“It is like the ones at the Ministry!” … “Just like…”

“What at the Three Broomsticks Inn was like the Ministry?” Regina wondered. “Nothing!” she answered for herself. Then again… Hesitantly, Regina climbed onto the toilet and stood into the bowl. There was no sensation of water or wetness. She reached up and pulled the goblin chain…

**********

“She pulled it! You’re on!”

**********

Regina Clarke staggered. Where was she? Someplace cold and dark. No, it wasn’t solid blackness that surrounded her, as Regina first assumed. She was in a small room of some sort. There was a light on one side, coming through what appeared to be an ornate grate in the wall. The grate was scarce ten centimeters wide but nearly a meter long.

“… such incompetence would have never permitted at our store!” came a familiar voice over the sound of running water. Regina recognized it: Anthony Richards! Where was the voice coming from? “We’d have fired her for sure!” Richards’ voice continued. The voice came from there too. Regina stepped quietly to the grate and peered through. She could see both Scorpius Malfoy and Anthony Richards standing by a sink washing their hands.

“I know,” agreed Malfoy, “but the alternative is the Hogshead which is a hundred times worse, believe me! Perhaps you and Tom should open an exclusive pub next…”

“An excellent idea,” agreed Richards as he turned off the water.
“So, are you going to tell me what the message said?” Malfoy asked while Richards reached for a towel and began to dry off his hands.

“Don’t you know?”

“No, it was sealed!” answered Malfoy piously.

“Don’t you know how to get around that by now?”

“Course,” Malfoy answered promptly. “But Grandfather sealed this one!” he told Richards. “And he knows what I know. I figured he put in some extra surprises should I try to open it… So, what’d it say?”

“It had a note from Tom like you suspected,” confirmed Richards. “He says the bribe worked and he’ll be entering the house today at noon to get the album.”

“And then what?”

“He’ll take it down to Pilkington, who will hand it over to Thomas.”

“And that will clear her name?”

“Probably not,” acknowledged Richards.

“So why bother?”

“Well, Paige plans to plead nolo contendere.”

“What’s that?”

“It means she neither accepts nor denies responsibility for the murder charge.”

“What good will that do?”

“The photo in the album will prove Thackeray is Nellie. Once the wizard community realizes Thackeray made H2, they’ll probably pin a medal on Paige whether she did it or not!”

“Yeah!”

“And after Paige is cleared, we’re going after Turay!”

“Turay?”

“Turay. Turay’s been involved in this since the beginning. Why didn’t she take the train last fall? It’s because she knew what was going to happen! Why hasn’t Turay told anyone what Thackeray did? It’s because she helped! Two hundred fifty-eight counts of kidnapping, even if it’s only for aiding and abetting will wipe that smug little pathetic pity-me look off her face!”

“Yeah,” agreed Malfoy as he moved out of sight. “She’ll be old and gray before she gets out of Azkaban!” He laughed as Regina heard the unmistakable sound of a door opening.

“If she gets out!” laughed Richards as he moved out of sight.

Regina heard the sound of the door close. The W.C. was empty.

Regina drew her wand.

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“She’s Apparated! Pass the word!”

**********
Mrs. Paige Brenna Crowley sat easily in the parlor settee. She was dressed in a comfortable dueling outfit, a split olive green skirt, matching vest and spidersilk scarf held in place with her celtic knot broach, and black knee high boots. A wand was in one perfectly manicured hand; the other hand lay in her lap covering a small round basket. The room was dark.

The creak of the front door opening sounded extraordinarily loud. The torch in the entryway flicked on sending a shaft of light into the parlor casting eerie shadows around the room. The front door creaked closed.

Then came the sound of footsteps, that of a single person entering the building. The footsteps sounded louder as someone neared the parlor. Paige tightened her grip on her wand and looked at the person walking into the parlor. She recognized the face but the person looked totally different from the spindily frizzy-haired child Paige had watched while on the train to Hogwarts. This person had smooth shiny black hair pinned into a neat bun on top of her head. The simple stylish blue-green suit she wore made her look more mature, more sophisticated than her apparent years. She stopped when she saw Paige.

“I see you got my invitation,” Paige said conversationally breaking the silence.

“Invitation?” questioned the person as she walked further into the room.

“Yes. Something simple and intriguing, but not too obvious.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to congratulate you on your accomplishments,” replied Paige coolly. “Perhaps find out how you did it…”

“Did what?”

“Killed Thackeray, of course,” answered Paige coldly.

“I didn’t kill her,” she denied. “You did!”

“Of course you did!” countered Paige. “Killed her, planted that jar she got from Pilkington’s Ball under her body, set a time spell to preserve things and then got on that train to Hogwarts to establish your alibi. At first, I thought you were merely a clever homicidal maniac out for your inheritance sooner than not. Then I heard you liked Sorbi so you couldn’t be Turay despite your appearance!”

“Why?”

“Sorbi is an adult’s drink with limited availability,” replied Paige informatively. “Nadia Turay would have never tasted let alone developed a liking for it. I wasn’t sure who you were until I learned your name and realized what was really going on!”

“My name?”

“Mmm. Regina Clarke.”

Clarke started. “Where did you get that name?” she demanded.

“That doesn’t matter,” replied Paige smoothly. “Curious how there’s no record of the name anywhere in the Ministry,” she continued. “Or at Hogwarts, for that matter, but then, it’s so easy to destroy things like that when there’s time… Though, I don’t know why you’d bother… After all, Regina Clarke “died” over two hundred years ago; it’s not as if anyone would notice the name today… However do you manage to possess bodies for so long?”

“I do not possess bodies!” Clarke told Paige coldly.

“What do you call it?” asked Paige curiously. “Nadia Turay is no more, and you are using her body.”

“I am Nadia Turay,”

“No,” corrected Paige. “You Apparated from Hogsmeade to here. There is no way that skill would be taught to a third year student! Regina Clarke is much more likely, especially given the family connection.”

“There is no connection!” Clarke denied.
“Of course there is,” corrected Paige. “I looked it up in my Lineage book. Nadia Turay is your great, great, great, great, great, granddaughter! Is it easier to posses a body if it’s related?” she inquired curiously. “Why didn’t you wait until Nadia was out of Hogwarts before possessing her?” Paige added. “I mean, it had to be a terribly annoying being stuck going to school again, especially as a Ravenclaw; they just don’t have the right priorities… And then there’s all those annoying hormones in a body so young…”

“You know absolutely nothing!” said Clarke coldly.

“Enlighten me,” requested Paige. “How does it work? Were you wandering about as a spirit for all those years until you found the right body of a relative you could posses? That wasn’t sleep at all during the summer and fall but you solidifying your control of Turay’s body, wasn’t it? Will it age like a normal body or did your possession halt the normal aging process? I bet Thackeray found out what you did to Turay and you killed her to keep her quiet. The one thing I don’t understand is why you kidnapped the students?”

***CRASH!!***

Crowley’s head turned in surprise. Regina Clarke whipped out her wand “Patricificus Totalus!” she said silently casting her spell before Crowley was aware she was being attacked! Regina was good with silent spells. And as for the noise, that was the book Regina had stuck to the entry wall with a temporary sticking spell; the spell wore off and the landing book had created the desired diversion.

Crowley’s body stiffened up out of the sofa and fell onto the floor.

“I wouldn’t waste my time explaining anything to you!” Regina snarled. “You won’t be alive long enough to use the information if I did!” she assured as she pocketed her wand and stepped past Crowley to the bookcase against the wall. “I’ve a letter here, how Tom Richards is dumping you!” she continued.

The letter was easiest enough to obtain; a simple Imperius Curse on Richards had worked wonders. Regina had intended to bring Richards along as a hostage, but he had slipped on the store floor and landed with a spectacular crash. The fall had interrupted the Curse and before Regina could regain control, that sniveling nitwit DeWitt had rushed out of some back room apologizing profusely for waxing the floor too much and begging to not get fired! It was pathetic! But DeWitt’s loud whining voice brought too much unwanted attention and Regina decided she could get Richards later, if necessary. Besides, it didn’t matter whether Richards actually dumped Crowley, just that Crowley thought she was being dumped…

“Actually, he describes how plans to turn you in for the reward if you ever come near him again and officially divorce you once you are behind bars.” Regina continued as she aimed her wand at the books. “He and his family can no longer bear the shame of an association with you…” she told Crowley.

“You, unable to live without him and bear the effect of your evil deeds alone, have decided to end it all, after leaving behind a complete confession, of course… You are such a romantic when it comes to Richards!” Regina added as an aside. “That will end all investigations closing the case of Thackeray’s murder freeing me to live my life as I please! I already have the confession written in your own hand, too!” she told Crowley. Getting Crowley’s confession was more difficult than obtaining Richards’ note; Crowley seemed to have developed a resistance to the Imperius Curse, most likely due to her extended time under the curse while with Umbridge. Regina had to curry favour with Slughorn to get access to his office. Then she had snuck in, combed through Slughorn’s old school papers and stolen those written by Crowley. They were all written in the same dark green ink. It was a simple matter to select the desired words she wanted from those papers and transfer them to a new page in a different order… “You might argue that you didn’t write it, but you did,” Regina informed Crowley aloud. “Every bit! I got all the words off your past papers at Hogwarts,” she told Crowley proudly. “Your confession is a bit more vague than I would like, but it will do nicely…”
The books on the shelf floated off and landed gently on the ground. “Yes, I knew it would be you here today and not Richards,” Regina told Paige smugly as she aimed her wand at the wall behind the now empty shelf. “You or that popinjay kid! And I was fairly certain he wasn’t coming. Your “invitation” was simple and intriguing, but with a serious flaw,” she explained. The bookcase wall vanished revealing a hole beyond. “Even with a Ministry bribe, Tom Richards couldn’t have come. He hasn’t visiting rights!” Regina reached into the hole and removed a thick book bearing the word “Photo Album” in gold lettering. The last time she had gotten out this album had been for Crowley’s Reception. Regina had thought it would be a good segue to cultivating Crowley as an asset. But her “attraction” spells kept on going awry... Regina had had to settle for the brother-in-law instead. His youth and recent activities with Pettigrew’s Hand showed potential...“And for your information, I had nothing to do with what happened last fall or H2!” Regina said aloud. “What would I want with a bunch of sniveling brats? Why do you persist in thinking so? Was that just a line to get me here?” she questioned curiously, not that Crowley could answer... Regina had recognized the “Person of Interest sketch” immediately when the Ministry had first posted it and had promptly hidden her album. But that didn’t explain why the Ministry was looking for someone who looked like a young Mrs. Thackeray in the first place. Regina turned and stepped back to Crowley. She set the album on the empty settee.

“Now,” she told Paige, “to set the stage...” Regina removed a folded scroll from her pocket, bent down and placed the scroll in the belt of Paige’s skirt. Something moved and suddenly Regina felt a sharp needle-like stabbing pain in her wrist! She gave a cry of surprise and pulled back. “What?” Looking down Regina saw the mouth of a green snake firmly attached to her wrist! She yanked it off letting go of the leathery thing immediately. It fell to the floor, coiled into a circle and stopped moving. Whatever it was, wasn’t a snake, not really, it had the head of a snake but was too flat, too still. The head and skin markings identified it as a boomslang snake; their skin was often used as a potion ingredient. Regina looked at her wrist and saw two tiny needle-like holes that were turning puffy and red. A curious sensation of weight and numbness seemed to be spreading out from the puncture! This was not good!

“What have you done?” demanded Regina as she drew her wand with her uninjured hand. She reached out and poked the “snake” lightly. It immediately uncurled, twisted and started to wrap itself around the wand. Regina swiftly pulled the wand away and the “snake” again coiled and lay still. “Motion activated,” she thought absently and noted a tiny basket on the floor, about the size of the coiled snake, that hadn’t been there before. At the same time the heavy numbing sensation had spread to her fingertips and seemed to be moving up her arm. The fingers still moved, but they didn’t feel right.

What to do... She had to find out what happened, but she didn’t dare remove the spell from Crowley without taking precautions. Using her left hand, Regina removed Crowley’s wand from her stiff fingers and placed the wand in her belt. Then Regina went into her bedroom, pulled the ties from the curtains and returned to the parlor. Curling her fingers about her wand, Regina caused the ties to wrap tightly around Crowley. “Finite Incantatem!” she hissed. Crowley’s body went limp.

“What did you do to me?” Regina demanded.

Crowley squirmed, sat up, leaned against the sofa and looked at Regina with black piercing eyes. “Poison!” she snapped. “Not boomslang because that takes too long. I filled the poison sacs with something else! Something quick with no antidote. Something Anthony mixed up for the kidnappers! Appropriate, don’t you think?”

Regina stared at her blankly. The numbing sensation continued up her arm. “Why?” “You set me up!” Crowley said venomously. “If I am going to rot in Azkaban for murder, I’d rather it be for something I actually did! But I won’t go to Azkaban,” Crowley told Regina as the numbing weight reached her shoulder. “You’re too far gone to cast spells now but I can move! I’m going to watch you die, then get my wand and leave! You’ll be found with both letters and the album; we’ll deny writing the letters and the photos in the album will definitely connect your family with H2! No one will care who did what once you’re dead!”

Suddenly Regina felt something like needles “shoot” through her body. Her wand dropped to...
the floor as she screamed in agony and surprise falling to her knees.

“I expect that’s the other poison I added,” said Crowley in a calm cold voice when Regina had stopped screaming. Crowley was free again seated just out of reach. She had wriggled over to Regina, picked up Regina’s wand and freed herself while Regina was screaming. “Did you see Thackeray’s face? The pain she must have endured before death! Why should your death be any easier?” The pain receded. Regina panted while she tried desperately to think what to do next. “You should be feeling the fire next,” Crowley said conversationally. “I haven’t mixed poisons before and wanted to make the most of the opportunity…”

Fire seemed to explode through her body Regina screamed unable to do anything else. The pain receded. Regina could again think. Her breathing was ragged and her throat hurt.

“It shouldn’t take long now,” said Crowley dispassionately, “I didn’t want to wait around all day watching you die; I have things to do…”

“Don’t you want to know what happened to Thackeray?” Regina croaked.

“Not particularly,” answered Crowley.

“You should,” Regina whispered. “I didn’t kill her.” Regina crawled by centimeters towards Crowley as she spoke.

“Oh?”

Regina reached out with her left hand. “I did this!” Regina grabbed Crowley’s ankle and closed her eyes. She focused all her thoughts on one final act of magic...

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White light seemed to emanate from Clarke’s fingers. Paige’s eyes opened wide. Her body arched up and rose into the air taking Clarke, still hanging on, with her. Then a thousand shafts of light, only pinpricks in thickness, shot out of Clarke. Her body arched in obvious agony. The shafts of light swirled around Clarke’s body once and then entered Paige. Paige’s body seemed to convulse and shutter, pierced by a thousand bright knives. Abruptly the streaming lights stopped. Both Paige and Clarke landed back on the floor with a heavy thud. There was an expression of pure horror and agony on Clarke’s frozen face.

Paige stirred and sat up. She looked down at herself, then around and finally down at the unmoving body of Clarke. Then one arm reached out and took hold of Clarke’s hand, the one still clutched at her ankle. With careful deliberation Paige pried open the hand finger by finger until it broke free from her ankle. Then Paige shoved the hand away.

Scarceley had she let go when Paige looked up! “No!” she exclaimed. “No!” Her hands went to her head—one on each side covering her ears. “NOOOOOOOO!” she screamed. Her body arched yet again flying into the air! A thin tongue of brilliant flame like a red-hot wire issued from Paige’s head and swirled around going back in, coming out at another location and back in again and out… In and out her head the red flame sped like a needle with red thread wrapping Paige’s head in a ball of molten red. The screams stopped; perhaps muffled by the red ball. Then the ball seemed to shrink back into Paige and vanish. Paige dropped to the floor in a heap.

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Chapter 44

A minute passed. Two minutes. Three… Five full minutes passed. All was silent; neither Clarke nor Paige moved. Wizard Dean Thomas, head of Magical Law Enforcement, stirred. “I think it’s over,” he said aloud giving the agreed upon “all clear,” signal. “I hope,” he added mentally. Dean took a step forward breaking the disillusionment spell that had surrounded him.

“That was brutal!” said Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt coming into view. “Is she alive?”

Healer Winonan stepped forward into view and hastened to Paige’s side.

“Who?” questioned Rita Skeeter increduously while coming into view. “They’re both dead aren’t they?

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Only three hours earlier Riter Skeeter had charged into Dean’s office wearing a chartreuse suit, hat and shoes while a matching quill and a small notebook followed along.

“I understand you’re conducting a raid to get Paige Crowley!” she told him.

“What? No we’re not doing that! Where did you hear that?”

“I have my sources,” persisted Skeeter confidently. “And I want in!”

“I repeat, there’s no raid!”

“Fine!” Skeeter pouted. “Have it your way! That just means I’ll have to use that extra space in my paper to report on how you got taken down by a Hogwarts student in that Security Drill” last month!”

“You know, with marshmallow crème all over… Should make for real entertaining reading by the time I finish with it!”

“How did you…?”

“I have my sources!” Skeeter repeated smugly. “Well?”

Dean sighed. “We do have an activity going on today,” he began hesitantly, “but it’s no raid!”

“What is it?”

“That’s confidential.”

“I can keep secrets,” Skeeter purred. “Look how long I’ve not told anyone about that marshmallow crème?”

“About a month,” muttered Dean.

“But it could be longer…” hinted Skeeter.

“What do you want?”

“I want in!” Skeeter repeated. “A story as it happens!”

“You mustn’t interfere! Your word!” Dean insisted.

“Done!”

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“How could you have forced us to stand by and let that happen Thomas!” Skeeter demanded.

“It had to be done that way or we couldn’t have gotten the confession,” Dean explained.

“Accio wand!” he said extending his arm. Paige’s wand flew into his hand.

“That’s how you get a confession?” questioned Skeeter in disbelief, “by killing off the guilty and innocent?” She pulled out her camera and began to take photos. It was annoying, but that was Skeeter.

Dean quickly pocketed Paige’s wand while Skeeter spoke and then held out his hand again.
“Accio wand!” he repeated collecting the wand Regina Clark had used.

“She’s alive!” announced Winonan suddenly. “Barely.”

Dean breathed a mental sigh of relief. “And Turay?” he asked as he reached down and cautiously picked up the basket that again held the fanged snakeskin. (Paige had calmly retrieved the snakeskin and returned it to the basket while Clarke was screaming.)

“Dead certainly!” answered Rita while Dean pulled out a small bag and placed the basket and its contents safely within.

“Perhaps not,” hedged Winonan.

“What do you mean? Look at her!”

“Looks aren’t everything,” replied Winonan. He pulled a tiny potion bottle out of his pocket and then knelt down next to Turay.

“I hardly think the antidote will do much for her now,” criticized Skeeter.

“For poison, no,” agreed Winonan, “but for other things…”

“What other things?”

“Draught of Living Death!” he answered succinctly.

“Seriously?” Rita asked in disbelief. “Not like that!”

“No, it’s usually not like that,” agreed Winonan. “But Mrs. Crowley added some other touches to convince Clarke it was really a lethal poison from which there was no escape.”

“Why?”

“To get the confession,” repeated Dean. “An iron-clad one in front of impeccable witnesses,” he told Skeeter. “Yourself included. We had a name and an idea, but no evidence that would hold up in court, not without that confession.”

Winonan lifted Turay’s head. (Dean hoped it was Turay.)

“And we wanted Nadia,” added Daniel Pilkington stepping into view.

“Nadia? Turay?” questioned Skeeter.

“Yes. Nadia was Nadia last year,” explained Pilkington. “But this year she was “Regina Clarke.” That implies a possession of some sort. We needed to convince Regina Clarke to leave Nadia’s body to free Nadia…”

Winonan uncorked his potions bottle.

“And that’s what entered Crowley?” questioned Skeeter.

“We believe so,” confirmed Winonan. He poured the contents of his potions bottle down Turay’s throat.

“And Mrs. Crowley was strong enough to resist the invasion,” finished Dean. That wasn’t exactly what had happened, but he was hoping Skeeter would see it that way…

“And this Regina Clarke killed Thackeray?”

“Not exactly. It is more likely Thackeray killed herself.”

“Huh?”

Dean walked over to the sofa. He opened the heavy red book and thumbed through the pages looking for a photo he knew had to be there. “Look,” he said stopping at a photo of two smiling students. Skeeter peered over Dean’s shoulder at a faded class photo. “Look familiar?” he questioned.

“The person of interest,” exclaimed Skeeter with recognition. “Wanted in connection with H2! But that photo, it’s ancient!”

“Yes,” agreed Dean, “that’s why no one stepped forward to identify the sketch, even those who who might have recognized it. They might have noted the similarity and thought it interesting but not of importance. We didn’t realize we were dealing with a ghost…” or something like that…

“That Regina Clarke?” questioned Skeeter indicating the photo.

Dean plucked the photo out of the album and flipped it over. On the back was some writing. “Forever friends,” it said and was signed “Dolores and Margaret”

“Dolores and Margaret?” questioned Skeeter.

“Margaret Moore who later became Margaret Thackeray,” filled in Dean. He handed the photo to Kingsley for his inspection. “We think Regina Clarke had taken over Mrs. Thackeray first
and then Nadia, much as you saw Regina try to take over Mrs. Crowley. But Mrs Crowley was ready and able to repel the attempt…” or something like that… Kingsley returned the photo; Dean placed it in his pocket for safe-keeping.

“Mrs. Crowley threatened to turn Mrs. Thackeray over to Child Services for child abuse if Nadia Turay was not on the Hogwarts Express,” contributed Pilkington helpfully. “Rather than risk Nadia saying something about her grandmum, who wasn’t her grandmum, to her friends, Thackeray took over Nadia, boarded the Express and, when the body was found, wrote the letter accusing Mrs. Crowley of murder…”

“Explaining why the accusation was written in Thackeray’s hand,” finished Dean. “And now, if you’ll excuse us, I have to take Mrs. Crowley into custody.” He stepped to her still form, knelt down and took hold of a wrist.

“No Apparating!” instructed Winonan abruptly. “She’s too fragile.”

“Right,” agreed Dean. He pulled out his wand, aimed it and said. “Wingardium Leviosa!” Paige’s still form lifted gently off the floor.

“Mrs. Crowley wants to be exonerated,” Pilkington suddenly said. “Completely. Can I count on your assistance?”

Skeeter looked from Pilkington to Dean. “Yes,” she said thoughtfully, “I think I can… Wait a minute, did you plan this?” she accused.

“I believe Mrs. Crowley did send you an invitation…” answered Pilkington smoothly before Dean could answer. “She wanted you to see for yourself her innocence… It’s a first person story like no one has ever read before,” he added seductively. “Will you help?”


“I get to interview them?” Skeeter bargained.

“Mrs. Crowley, of course,” answered Pilkington smoothly, “Nadia is under-aged,” he reminded. “I can’t make guarantees for her…”

Skeeter nodded. “Fair enough.” She took several more photos. “I’d best be on my way,” she said when she finished. “I’ve a deadline to meet.” With that, Skeeter put away her camera and stepped quickly to the door.

Dean followed floating Paige out the parlor and into the entry where three other aurors stepped into view. They had been waiting for him. They were also witnesses to what had happened, witnesses Skeeter knew nothing about and back-up if necessary.

“Wait for Winonan,” Dean told one of them. “You two take Mrs. Crowley to St. Mungos,” he told the others. “She can’t be Apparated, so call Stan…”

“Call the Limo,” interrupted Pilkington smoothly. He had followed Dean and Paige into the entry. Dean looked at him in surprise. “The limo has better accommodations for this kind of situation,” he added in explanation. “Besides my client would not wish to be stuffed in the back of a taxi,” Pilkington said primly.

“I don’t have a card,” Dean told him bluntly.

“Use mine,” offered Pilkington generously while fishing out a green business card and handing it to Dean. “I can always get another…” Dean glared. “Have to protect the interests of my client…” Pilkington added cheerfully.

“Yeah,” Dean agreed taking the card with reluctance. The green card wasn’t made of the usual paper but had the same cool feel as snakeskin… “Use the limo,” he told the aurors. “Tell Rupert to bill the Ministry,” he added while handing the card to one of the aurors. They all knew that if Paige survived she’d need to go to St. Mungos for follow-up. Winonan had already set up a private room in the Muggle side and the aurors were to use the Muggle entrance to reduce their chances of being seen; one of them already had the key… “No visitors until I say so—”

“Except for me, of course,” interrupted Pilkington smoothly. Dean glared again. “She is my client, after all,” Pilkington reminded.

“Yeah, Pilkington too,” Dean agreed reluctantly, “but no one else!”
“Ms. Skeeter?” suggested Pilkington hopefully.

“No!” exploded Dean, “Not until I’m ready! And she needs to be cuffed to the bed!” he ordered the aurors.

“But surely, not after what you’ve seen?” murmured Pilkington in protest.

“Especially after what I’ve seen!” Dean snapped. Paige was scary! If she hadn’t already taken her auror vows; if this whole situation hadn’t been scripted in advance, Dean would have happily hauled Paige to Azkaban and thrown away the key himself! “Mrs. Crowley is still a person of interest who has already escaped from our custody once,” Dean reminded. “I do not want it happening again. And be sure to search her thoroughly!” he added to the aurors almost as an afterthought.

“Sir?” questioned one of the aurors no doubt having seen the two wands stuck in Dean’s waistband, one of which was Paige’s.

“For a second wand!” Dean explained further. “Or third!”

The auror’s eyes widened comprehension. An extra wand would help explain Paige’s first escape… “Yes sir.”

“And don’t leave her side,” Dean ordered, not that he needed to worry. These were the aurors Paige had slipped out on during her escape; there was no way they’d let that happen again…

“But if I need a moment with my client?”

“Not even for Pilkington!” Dean told the aurors. “You can wait for that,” Dean growled to Pilkington.

Pilkington smiled and nodded. “Of course,” he agreed giving a slight bow. Pilkington was a pain—a pit bulldog in wizard robes! But at least he knew when to back off. Dean was glad Pilkington didn’t specialize in criminal law!

Dean waited until the limo had left before returning to the house and entering the parlor.

“How is she?” he asked of Turay while kneeling down besides the two.

“She seems to be O.K. but she’ll need a complete check-up to be sure,” answered Winonan.

“Of course,” agreed Dean. “I hope you understand, but we’re taking you into custody,” he told Turay in a gentle voice. Turay looked up at him wordlessly. “We have to after what’s happened here,” Dean added almost apologetically.

“Why don’t you worry about that after her check-up,” Winonan told Dean as he scooped Turay up in his arms and stood. “I’m taking her to St. Mungos, now” he announced.

“I’ll go with you,” volunteered Kingsley.

Dean nodded. Kingsley would serve as the second auror guard for the trip.

“I’ll close up here first and then meet you at St. Mungos,” he told Kingsley. Kingsley nodded.

He picked up the photo album and the two stepped out of the parlor with Turay.

Dean followed them to the entry. “Make sure she’s thoroughly searched and cuff her to the bed too,” Dean ordered the remaining auror who had waited in the entry to join the group. She nodded. After what he had seen, Clarke or Turay or whomever she was, despite her youth-like appearance was just as scary as Paige and definitely very, very dark! Perhaps she wasn’t now, but Dean was taking no chances. There was a Muggle room waiting for Turay at St. Mungos too, with aurors! Turay would not be left alone until questions were answered and certain matters were squared away.

The group stepped outside. Kingsley pulled out his card and called for Stan. Soon a battered taxi rolled up to the curb. Dean watched from the doorway as the four got into the cab and drove away.

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When the taxi rolled out of sight, Dean Thomas went back into the house and shut the door. Then Dean went into the bedroom, picked up a chair and brought it into the parlor. “It should be all clear,” he announced to the empty room as he set the chair down. But the room wasn’t empty. Two more people appeared seeming to come out of the fireplace. It had been a tight squeeze to fit
everyone in the parlor against the walls but necessary. Witnesses, lots of them, were essential with
something as nebulous as a claim of “possession.” While Paige knew there would be witnesses, she
did not know who, where or how many. That would give them the edge had “Regina” successfully
possessed Paige and gained access to Paige’s memories.

“Have a seat,” Dean invited. Harry Potter and Holly Wycliff sat down on the settee. As soon
as Regina Clarke rolled away with Leila Pilkington, Holly Wycliff had gone to Hagrid’s hut where
Harry was waiting. The two had taken thestrals out of Hogwarts. Then they had Apparated to
Harry’s mansion. Dean was waiting for them there and had personally taken them to Thackeray’s
home before anyone else had arrived. Holly’s statements would never hold up in court, but Harry
saw by them; Madam Pomfrey said the Holly’s health assessments were exceedingly accurate and
Luna said Holly’s emotional reads should be seriously considered. Dean would be remiss in his
duties if he did not take advantage of every means possible to insure the safety of the Ministry and
the wizard community. Dean pulled the chair he had brought close to Holly and sat down.

“How are you doing?” he questioned with concern.

“Fine,” she said in a soft voice. But Dean didn’t believe her. Holly looked pale and strained.
Her body was stiff and her face streaked with tears. While the experience had been terrible for all of
them, it had to be worse for an Empath.

“If you can manage it, I’ve some questions to ask before you return to Hogwarts.”

“I’ll try.”

“Thank you,” said Dean quietly. He reached into his extendable pants pocket (handy thing,
extendables) and pulled out an official scribe quill (red plumed) and testimony parchment (pretty
much the same as Hogwarts test paper.) Dean always carried around official paper and quill because
he never knew when he needed to take a statement. He set the quill to the paper and murmured the
date, his name, the person being interviewed and the witness present (Harry.) The quill promptly
wrote down everything he said.

“I want you to know this is all totally unofficial,” he began. “And nothing that can ever be
used in a court of law. But it’s best to take a proper statement while all the memories are fresh. Do
you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“This doesn’t look very unofficial,” observed Harry mildly.

“Yes, well, Miss Wycliff is also a witness,” reminded Dean. “We need to take statements of
all the witnesses sooner than not. Miss Vasari is at St. Mungos doing the same thing.”

Ravindra was not a witness so her questions would force the aurors to be more precise and
descriptive in their statements. Hopefully, things would never make it to court, but if they did, the
statements would only be made public if later testimony on the stand contradicted the original
statement. “I’m taking your statements because the others don’t know you and Miss Wycliff were
also present and I would rather it stay that way as long as possible.” added Dean. “Are you ready?”
he asked Holly.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. First off, do you believe it’s really me?” Dean asked. The last time Dean had tried to
speak with Holly on something serious, she had fled like a frightened deer. Since that time, Dean had
had some long conversations with Luna about why Holly was sent to the Ministry. Dean now
realized Holly had probably fled because he was practicing Occlumency. Luna said Holly was better
now, but what did that mean?

“I guess,” she whispered.

That was not what Dean wanted to hear. “Not just “I guess,” Miss Wycliff, but certain,”
Dean told her. “I ask you this, not out of idle curiosity, but because I need to ask you some very
personal questions, the kind you probably shouldn’t answer unless you were absolutely certain the
person in front of you was the Head of Magical Law Enforcement or someone with an interest or a
right to know.”

“You’re practicing Occlumency,” Holly answered bluntly as if that answered everything. It
did. Dean was the kind of person Holly feared the most. In one sense it was a relief to know as he
was Head of Magical Law Enforcement and he should be practicing Occlumency. But it wouldn’t reassure Holly.

“Yeah, well there’s nothing I can do about that,” Dean apologized. “Is there something I can do or say that would make you more certain?”

Holly looked at him thoughtfully. Dean met her gaze willing all the sincerity he could. Then Holly’s eyes dropped. She leaned forward. “May I?” she asked softly while pointing at his chest.

“What?” Dean asked in surprise. He looked at her hand and realized it was pointing at his boutonniere. “Uh, sure,” he answered in confusion.

Holly took hold of the stem and unpinned the flower from his lapel. Abruptly Holly jabbed the pin into his leg!

“What the?” Dean exclaimed in pain and surprise.

“Holly!” said Harry pulling Holly back. “What are you doing?”

“Yes!” said Holly not resisting Harry's restraint. “You are indeed Wizard Dean Thomas, head of Magical Law Enforcement.”

Dean ignored the stabbing pain he still felt and looked at Holly. Despite the flower in one hand and the pin held menacingly in the other, Holly’s face and body were different somehow, more relaxed and open. “I’m glad you’re certain,” Dean said while rubbing his leg. That pin hurt!

“I’m sorry,” Holly apologized. “But you wanted me to be certain! Regina dropped her Occlumency the moment she felt the snake bite,” Holly told Dean. “I was hoping it would be the same for you and it was!”

“Yeah, well, I hope you’re not planning to do that every time we talk,” Dean muttered still rubbing his leg.

“Of course not,” agreed Holly while setting both the pin and the flower on the settee next to her. “You’d be expecting it,” she told him. “But it worked for today.”

“Can you still sense him?” asked Harry curiously.

“No,” she told him, “but it was enough. What did you wish to know?” Holly asked turning her attention to Dean.

Right. Dean forced his mind to the business at hand realizing suddenly Holly had already answered one of his questions. “Good,” he said. “We all know what we saw, and what it looked like, but what did you sense? Take your time before answering,” Dean instructed. “What I told Ms. Skeeter was mostly guesswork,” he added. “What you say could confirm things and maybe fill in some of the blanks. It would really help to have an idea of how to proceed next but I want that information to be absolutely accurate.”

Holly took a deep breath and then exhaled before speaking. “I didn’t sense anything before the snake bite,” she told him. “And then I felt, someone…”

“Regina Clarke?” questioned Dean.

“Emotions don’t come with name,” Holly replied reprovingly. “But it wasn’t the person I know as Nadia Turay.”

“So the person who looked like Nadia Turay did not have the emotions of Nadia Turay?” clarified Dean.

“Correct.”

“Then what?”

“What did you feel?” added Harry softly.

“Surprise, pain, and numbness,” Holly answered. “Then anger and worry. Lots of worry.”

“What next?”

“Pain,” she said flatly. “Horrible, horrible pain.”

“Anything else?”

Holly was silent a moment before answering. “She told the truth when she said she didn’t kill Thackeray,” Holly said softly. “But she also told the truth when she said, “I did this!” while grabbing Paige’s ankle… And what she did to Paige…” Holly sniffed and gulped. “It was horrible!” Holly suddenly turned to Harry, hugged him tightly and began to sob openly into his shoulder. He held her protectively. Dean waited until the tears subsided. “I guess it all depends on what you think of as
“killed,” Holly whispered.

“What did she do to Paige?” questioned Dean gently.

“I’m not sure; there was so much pain,” she answered. “But it wasn’t Paige who sat up…”

“Who was it?”

“It was, it was,” Holly gulped. “The person Paige called Regina Clarke! And we just stood by and let her kill Paige!” Holly wailed. “How could we have done that?”

“But you heard Healer Winonan,” protested Harry. “Paige is alive.”

“No!” argued Holly. “It’s Regina!”

“Hmmm,” said Dean sympathetically. It would look like that. “What about when there were the red lights?” he questioned.

“Huh?”

“When Paige started screaming,” Dean clarified guessing Holly was not looking at much at the time. “What did you sense then?”

“Pain,” Holly replied dully. “Horrible, horrible pain! And then, nothing! Ms. Skeeter was right!” Holly continued. “How could we have sacrificed Paige just to get a confession? This has all terribly wrong! Regina cleared Paige’s name with her dying breath and then gets to walk free as Paige!”

“Did you sense … evil or darkness in Regina?” asked Dean cautiously.

“Evil is not an emotion,” Holly told him between sobs.

“No,” agreed Dean. “It isn’t. What about Turay?” he asked changing the subject.

“Huh?”

“What did you sense when Healer Winonan woke her?”

Holly closed her eyes in thought. “Nadia! I think.”

That was not good. “I think?” questioned Dean.

“Well it’s been nearly a year since I last sensed her emotions,” Holly reminded. “People change. It’s Nadia,” she confirmed, “but different somehow.”

“How?”

“Just different,” answered Holly vaguely. “I’ll have to think about it…”

“Of course,” agreed Dean deciding to not press for more information. “Let me know when you have worked it out,” he requested knowing that if Winonan cleared Nadia, she’d be sent back to Hogwarts where Holly would be able to continue her observation. “Can you think of anything else?”

“No.”

“Then that should be about it. If you would like to read this over before signing?” he suggested handing the parchment to Holly. She sniffed and gulped not bothering to look at the page while placing her right thumbprint on it… “Thank you for your time,” said Dean as he rolled the parchment up. “You’ve been very helpful” he added while stuffing the parchment in his pocket. “I hate to rush but I’ve got to get to St. Mungos,” he added while re-pinning his boutonniere, “and you should return to Hogwarts. I’ll get your statement later, Harry.” Dean stood to leave.

“No,” said Harry quietly.

“Huh?”

“We aren’t finished,” Harry told him. “Holly’s been very helpful,” he agreed, “but you haven’t been. I don’t care about your security rules,” Harry added. “Holly’s a mess, Dean, and it doesn’t have to be that way; you need to tell her the rest.” Holly looked questioningly from Harry to Dean.

Dean looked at the two, Harry’s determined face and Holly’s tear-streaked one. Rules were rules…

“You owe her,” added Harry persistently.

Then again, the rules didn’t cover every situation and they did owe Holly a lot; it was the letter containing her information that sent Paige to the Thackeray residence and the dead body in the first place… Dean sighed and sat back down.

“Paige is an auror,” he told Holly, something he never mentioned to anyone unless he
absolutely had to…

Holly sniffed and rubbed her eyes. “So?” she whispered. The news didn’t seem to surprise her at all. Then Dean remembered Holly had been dueling with the auror students at Hogwarts and had probably dueled against Paige. It would be no stretch of her imagination for her to believe Paige had become an auror.

“Aurors make an unbreakable vow,” he reminded.

“So?”

“Do you know what happens if she beaks her vow?”

“She dies?”

“That’s right.”

“So?”

Dean mentally rolled his eyes. Sometimes Muggle-borns were so dense… “Paige has sworn to destroy all forms of Dark Magic wherever it may be found,” he told Holly.

“So?”

“You may not be able to sense “evil” Holly, but Regina’s actions were certainly dark in nature and Paige is obligated to do everything she can to destroy Regina or she will have broken her vow…”

“So?”

“Paige lived!”

“No, that was Regina,” corrected Holly.

Dean sighed. “An unbreakable vow is a kind of magic that goes through your entire body and binds every bit of it to that vow,” he explained. “Regina was dark, Holly,” Dean declared. “There is no way Regina could survive in Paige’s body, not after Paige made that vow.”

“You mean?”

“I mean, there was more to this operation than to get Regina to reveal herself and make a confession. We had to stop a dark witch from possessing members of our community! To do that, we convinced Regina that Nadia Turay’s death was eminent. Regina needed to transfer to someone else before she was trapped in a dead body. We gave her Paige and Regina took the bait. Paige did not resist Regina’s “possession” but instead waited until there was no chance for Regina to escape and then Paige … kept … her … vow!”

“You mean?”

“Yes, that it was Paige who survived,” Dean told her with absolute confidence. Had Paige not survived, she would have still tried to take Regina down with her dying breath. Her vow required it and her body would have never permitted something as dark as Regina to live within it.

“You sure?” she asked hopefully.

“Positive! You could always try that little pin trick of your with her if you wanted,” Dean told her, “not that I would ever dare poke Paige with a pin,” he added thoughtfully, “but it is definitely Paige who survived…”

“Oh, thank you!” Holly gushed leaning over impulsively and hugging Dean.

Over her shoulder Dean saw Harry mouth a silent “Thank you!”

“Yes, well, you mustn’t ever tell anyone Paige is an auror, ever!” Dean told Holly. “Don’t talk about it to anyone, not even Paige!” he admonished. “Someone might be listening! Regina did not know Paige was an auror or she would not have tried to posses her! Though Regina appeared to require physical touch to transfer into Paige, he added, “that may not have been the case. She might have cast around for someone else to possess—like you!” Dean shuttered. A Dark Empath—now that was a scary thought.

“No sir,” agreed Holly. “I would never tell on Paige. But, um, do you suppose I could be with her until she wakes up?” She reached out and again unpinned Dean’s boutonniere.

Dean looked down at her actions. “Seriously?” he questioned in disbelief.

“Seriously!” she said firmly while securing the boutonniere onto her robes. “I’m very paranoid…”

“Very!” intoned Harry in agreement with a solemn face.
“As you wish,” laughed Dean. “You will let me know how it turns out, won’t you,” he added. Not that he ever thought the results would be anyone but Paige. He just wanted to know what Paige would do when Holly stabbed her…

“Yes, sir.”

**********
Innocent!

In a daring move to clear her name Paige Crowley confronted her main accuser Nadia Turay! This reporter watched the exciting encounter personally! Third year student Nadia Turay broke school rules yesterday and Apparated from Hogsmeade to London just to meet Crowley. In Apparating, Turay revealed she was actually possessed by the 263 year-old ghost, Regina Clarke! Regina Clarke further revealed that there was no murder of Thackeray at all! That’s right! The incompetent Ministry has done it again! Dean Thomas, Head of Magical Law Enforcement, mistakenly interpreted the body of Magaret Thackeray as a murder victim! He should have realized what he saw was the withered husk left behind when a ghost possesses a body for so long there is nothing living left when it leaves! Thomas had no idea Regina Clarke had possessed the body of Margaret Thackeray for over thirty years! But Paige Crowley did!

“I knew something was off the moment I visited Turay in December at Tackeray’s invitation,” said Mrs. Crowley. “Thackeray claimed Turay was asleep for over six months,” explained Crowley. “I knew that wasn’t a normal sleep. Waking her would require some very special potions…” said Crowley modestly.

Thirteen-year old Nadia Turay was orphaned last spring when her mother Reaghan Turay unexpectedly died during a magical accident. Turay reports she has no memory of anything after she got off the Express last summer until Mrs. Crowley masterfully awakened her in December. Turay had no idea her mother was even dead until the healers told her in the hospital. “My mum was very good with magic; maybe grandmum killed her because she found out about Regina!” Turay has no idea how she came to be asleep over the summer and fall, nor can she remember anything from the time she left the hospital in December to waking up in her grandmum’s house with Healer Winonan bending over her.

Healer Winonan reports that Turay was the clear victim of classic spirit possession by Regina Clarke, Turay’s maternal ancestor. This heinous crime had apparently been going on for generations right under the Ministry’s very nose!

Mrs. Crowley not only recognized something was off about Thackeray in December, she took action! She insisted Nadia Turay be sent to Hogwarts where she would be safe. Then Mrs. Crowley returned to the house to address her suspicions about Thackeray. But Clarke had moved faster possessing the child Nadia, and going to Hogwarts leaving behind Thackeray’s body along with incriminating evidence against Crowley. This reporter feels certain Clarke used her Apparating abilities to sneak out of Hogwarts and further terrorize the wizard community by vandalizing the merchant stores!

Unfortunately for Clarke, the memory merge that usually happens with a possession was incomplete and the attentive eye of Headmistress’s Assistant Anthony Richards not only noted the differences, but recognized their importance! “There is a place for spirits at Hogwarts,” said Richards in a recent interview, “and it is not in the students!” Concerned for the safety of the students, Richards orchestrated an elaborate plan to draw Clarke/Turay out of Hogwarts and back to the Thackeray mansion.

A waiting Mrs. Crowley in the Thackeray mansion not only convinced Clarke to confess, but revealed Thackeray is, in fact, the Person of Interest the Ministry has sought in connection with the kidnapping of our students last Fall! Then Mrs. Crowley heroically saved Turay’s life by tricking Clarke into leaving Turay’s body. Clarke then foolishly tried to possess Mrs. Crowley but Mrs. Crowley’s superior mind was ready for the invasion and defeated the spirit of Regina Clarke completely! We will never know what sinister purpose Thackeray had when she created H2, but our children need never worry about H2 again!

This reporter thinks Mrs. Crowley deserves not only our praise and admiration for her heroism and bravery, but all the rewards the posted by the Ministry for information leading to and
the capture of the H2 kidnapper! When asked about the disposal of the reward moneys, Head of Magical Laws Enforcement Dean Thomas said, “Our investigation is not complete, we need to finish before a determination can be made…” It is clear they are stalling…

Both Mrs. Crowley and Nadia Turay are in the hospital and expected to make a full recovery. For more details concerning this amazing turn of events, see page 5.

The Daily Prophet…

Anthony Richards was on cloud nine! He had been on cloud nine ever since he had been called up to the Headmistress’ office and found Rita Skeeter waiting to interview him. Him! Not Wycliff! Not Potter! But Him! Mindful of Paige’s advice, Anthony kept his answers brief and modest—he gave all the credit to the students who worked to help him, but gave no specific names. That way, only his would be mentioned in any article Skeeter wrote.

Before that time, Anthony had been worried. Very worried. The last time he had been called to McGonagall’s office, she had handed him a letter from Wizard Pilkington. In it was a letter from Paige… “I want you to know that I don’t exactly approve of this request,” McGonagall began sternly after Anthony had finished reading the letter. Had Wizard Pilkington sent one to her too? He must have. “But if you succeed in getting Miss Turay to Apparate out of Hogsmeade, then she is not the third year student she is supposed to be… I suggest you make use of your … Study Group…”

So Anthony had taken the letter to his advisors. After that, he pretty much sat back and let Pilkington take charge. He knew she was better at this sort of thing than he. The Ravenclaws had planned and executed their escape from H2; all Anthony had done was keep the Slytherins cooperating and greet McGonagall afterwards.

Corner and his friends had created the “peep” room and installed the temporary toilet and the goblin chain at the Three Broomsticks. Professor Lovegood and had been waiting in the peep room (disillusionment charm) when Clarke had arrived and could verify Clarke had indeed Apparated. Longbottom had hidden in the halls in case Clarke had not found the goblin chain or known what to do with it; Anthony and Scorpius had been prepared to recite their part in the halls if necessary…

After that, Anthony spent the day worrying. He did not know what was planned; would it work?

His only distraction came in listening to Basu’s latest incensed complaint:

“First she saturates the dungeons with that wand of hers!” Basu whispered angrily. Basu had just returned from a successful lecture tour in Wales. She was scheduling a lecture trip to Ireland next. “Only the dungeons and it all got into our dorm! The fumes were so bad we had to evacuate! Does she get into trouble? Of course not!”

“She’s just worried about the kidnappers,” answered Anthony mildly. “As should we all be until they are captured. I’m sure Professor Iverson will have a talk with her, though,” he assured. “That was a very nice bubblehead charm you cast,”

Anthony added as a distraction.

“I shouldn’t have had to cast it!” exclaimed Basu righteousy. “But she doesn’t even finish her “search!” she added angrily.

“Oh?” Anthony was not surprised. Wycliff’s Castle Search had been initiated only to encourage Clarke to leave Hogwarts and go to Hogsmeade. After that, her time was her own as long as she kept out of Clarke’s sight.
“Yes! Twenty minutes later I see her outside sneaking into the woods with Potter, and I don’t mean Albus! Leaving the grounds without proper authorization! It’s disgraceful!”

“You don’t know that she had no authorization,” said Anthony mildly. “You said Potter was with her and he’s a governor and her guardian...” Anthony had no idea why Wycliff had left and didn’t really care; Wycliff had done her part to perfection stopping once Clarke had left...

“I’d like to see Malfoy try that stunt with his grandfather!” Basu retorted angrily.

“Look-it, if it were authorized, she wouldn’t have to sneak about to leave!”

“True,” agree Anthony. “I’ll look into it,” he promised and returned to worrying about Paige...

Anthony felt even higher than cloud nine after the Prophet came out the next morning. Paige was cleared and everyone knew he’d had a part in it! Even more, the reward money for the kidnapping was almost guaranteed! The whole school, even the Slytherins were openly congratulating him! They congratulated him even more when Anthony handed out 10% discount cards for Tom’s store to each Slytherin—in appreciation for suffering Wycliff’s wand work—“We had to convince Clarke to leave the school!” he told the others, “and nothing works better than that stinky wand!”

“That still doesn’t excuse Wycliff taking off into the woods!” hissed Basu in Anthony’s ear. “And she’s not here now either!” Anthony looked around and noted Wycliff was definitely absent from the Hufflepuff table.

A motion at the door though, caught his attention; Wycliff walked in. She was smiling and wearing a red carnation that looked a lot like a Ministry boutonniere on her robe. Practically the whole Hufflepuff table rose in greeting. “How does she manage it?” intoned Basu with disgust. “Princess Wycliff makes a splash entrance ruining your moment!”

“Perhaps,” agreed Anthony. “But I kept her out of the Prophet... Besides, they’ll forget about her soon enough...”

When it came time to leave, the Slytherins all rose as one and swept out of the hall—by year, firsts in front, the older ones last but in the lead proudly walked Anthony! It was a magnificent show and statement of solidarity for all to see. Into the entryway they marched, down the stairs, past the potions room and into the small room where their portrait resided.

**********

Holly Wycliff finished the last of her juice and set the glass back down on the table. Sasha curled blissfully on her lap and kneaded Holly’s leg happily; the deep contented rumble of Sasha’s purr against Holly’s body felt wonderful. It was good to be back at Hogwarts, good to be among friends again, even better to think the nightmare was finally over. Holly hadn’t even realized how much the shadow of the kidnapper had weighed down upon her until its absence made her feel like singing and dancing!

Holly had anxiously spent all night seated by Paige’s bed waiting for her to wake. When she did, Holly had needed no pin to confirm Paige’s identity. Paige was dazed and disoriented when she woke, very disoriented. Holly was able to read and recognize Paige’s emotions easily before they abruptly winked off. Holly’s relief was indescribable! With a broad smile, Holly notified Healer Winonan that Paige was awake, (emphasis on the word “Paige,”) and slipped quickly away with Cousin Harry Apparating back to Hogsmeade and from there returning to Hogwarts.

“Help!”

Holly looked up and saw several older Slytherin students rush through the doorway. They were disheveled and out of breath with easy to read emotions! Holly rose in alarm. Most of the
students in the Great Hall did too. “There’s bludgers in the dorm!” they shouted.

Bludgers? “Noooo!” thought Holly in a panic as she joined the other students who had already rushed down the stairs heedless of any instructions McGonagall or the Professors might have given… She knew what kind of damage bludgers could do; they all did. Holly stopped in shock when she reached the area outside the Slytherin dorm! It looked like a battlefield with fallen bodies everywhere! The floor was pitted and littered with bits of ceiling. Several bloodied student were hunched over each other on one side bouncing up and down obviously holding onto a bludger.

Thwack!
A dark round bludger whizzed up past Holly!

Thwunk! The bludger smashed into the ceiling showering Holly with bits of rock. Holly immediately ducked down holding her arms over head. What spell stopped a bludger? She had no idea.

“Catch it!” came a voice as the bludger whizzed downward.

Thwack!
Out of the corner of her eye Holly saw someone leap out and fall to the floor on top of the bludger. “Got it!” yelled Conner as his body was violently lifted up again and again as the bludger tried to escape.

“Come on!” came Albus’ voice and Holly saw him fall on top of Conner. More and more people piled on much like a Rugby Scrimmage! The whizzing and thwacks stopped. In the relative silence, Holly could hear the moans of pain from the fallen students.

“Find that box!” someone shouted.

“Use my cloak!” said Rose taking off her robe.

“That won’t work!” protested Hugo. “The fabric’s not strong enough!”

“Then we can use more robes!” persisted Rose. “Double it up! Triple it! Come on!” Holly whipped off her own robe and handed it to Rose. More robes followed. Soon the bludger was encased in a thick blanket of robes. Somebody cast a spell fastening the robes to the floor holding the bludger securely with it. More robes were shed to encase the other bludger…

“Blankets!” Holly said decisively. “Go inside and bring out all the sheets, towels, pillows and blankets you can find!” she told the nearest Slytherin (in this case Prefect Gruffudd.) Without waiting for a reply Holly stepped to the nearest student, Vincent Crabbe (S2), and knelt next to him,. “Injured right shoulder,” she said aloud. Not good but not life threatening. “You’ll be fine,” she assured him and moved onto the next student lying face down on the floor moaning. “Malfoys!” she thought with shock.

“Malfoy!” she thought with shock.

“He pushed me away!” came the quivery voice of Ivy Malfoy. Her ankle hurt, probably broken or maybe just a sprain. Holly didn’t take the time to figure out which. It could wait. “It w-would have landed on me!”

“He's your brother!” reminded Holly as she examined Scorpius. “That’s what brothers do! They act like they hate you, but when it really matters, they’re there!” Scorpius was moaning in pain. There was something wrong with his back. Very wrong. “Don’t try to move,” Holly told Scorpius, but she didn’t know if he even heard, let alone understood her. “Stay with him,” Holly told Ivy. “And don’t let anybody move him. Can you do that?” Ivy nodded. “It’s very important he doesn’t move,” Holly repeated. Ivy sniffed and nodded again.

Holly moved to the next person... Shoulder pain—nothing life threatening. “It’ll be O.K.” Holly assured. “Just don’t try to move and it won’t hurt as much.” She moved to the next person—Anthony! He was barely conscious and Holly could feel everything he was feeling! Head pounding, nausea, stomach, unbelievable pain, sharp stabbing pains that were undoubtedly splintered ribs, difficulty breathing, that meant the broken ribs had probably punctured the lungs… The stabbing pain in his shoulder and arm seemed miniscule in comparison… Holly reached into her bag and drew out her quill and paper. She’d have to write it all down before she could decide what to do…

“We were walking to the portrait,” began a voice next to Holly, Geoffrey Bromadge. (S1) His head was pounding, probably a concussion. “When Richards suddenly doubled over and flew back
into the rest of us knocking us over! He fell on top of us and while we were trying to get up
something plowed through us from the other side!"
   “The bludgers,” murmured Holly.
   “And then it came back… Bludgers?” questioned Bromadge. “No! The thing that came at us
was horizontal! Bludgers only go up and down don’t they?”
Holly shrugged. She didn’t know, but it was a bludger she had seen Conner jump onto. “You
couldn’t see?” she asked absently as she wrote.
   “No,” admitted Bromadge, “whatever it was, was invisible. It came at us so fast I didn’t know
what to think; maybe a troll swinging a club?”
   “Trolls aren’t invisible,” stated Holly remembering what she had learned from her Defense
Against the Dark Arts classes.
   “Neither are bludgers,” reminded Bromadge.
   “No,” agreed Holly. But she had seen a bludger. Had someone cast an invisibility spell on
them, which later wore off?
   “How’s it going?” questioned Jeremy Corner as he knelt down besides Holly. His presence
was no surprise; Holly had seen him coming up out of the corner of her eye. Holly had seen a lot
more of Jeremy ever since the incident on the fourth floor. She had the distinct impression he was
making sure he didn’t accidentally “sneak” up on her…
   “What idiot came up with a game where you shoot cannon balls at people!” Holly answered
bitterly.
   “One who knows the spell to repair bones!” Jeremy answered.
   “What?” asked Holly with surprise. “There’s a spell?”
   “Yep!” He nodded behind Holly. She looked and saw Vincent Crabbe stretching out his arm,
and rotating his shoulder, a shoulder she knew positively had been broken only a few minutes
earlier… Madam Pomfrey was waving her wand over the leg of another student. “Only taught to
Healers as it’s a rather complicated spell!” Jeremy continued cheerfully. Holly felt her whole body
sag with relief. The injuries, they were mostly bone! Things weren’t as bad as it appeared. “But we
can field test the Tea if you’d like,” Jeremy added drawing out a small pouch from his pocket.
   “You have some?” questioned Holly in surprise. Of course, she had some Tea in her bag, but
that Jeremy had some too…
   “Course,” he answered easily. “Wouldn’t risk a trip back to H2 without it! So, what wrong
with Malfoy that you don’t want him moved?” Jeremy asked in a conversational voice as he replaced
the pouch back in his pocket.
   “Malfoy?” Holly’s forced herself to think back. “Uh…”
   “Ivy won’t let anyone near, said you said he mustn’t be moved!” Jeremy explained further.
   “Back,” answered Holly, “It’s broken; the bone shards, they could sever his spine! I could
feel sensation in his legs but it was tingly, the wrong move and he could loose it all!”
Jeremy nodded. “I’ll pass the word.” He rose.
   “Jeremy!” Holly exclaimed before he could leave.
   “Yes?”
Holly hastily handed her parchment of Richards’ symptoms to Bromadge and rose too. “The
kidnapper!” she whispered urgently. “He’s still out there!”
   “Huh?”
   “This was no accident!” she told him.
   “I know that,” answered Jeremy. “But … the kidnapper?”
   “It’s not Clarke!” Holly stated.
   “Not?”
   “I was hoping it was all over but it’s not!”
   “Not?” echoed Jeremy again.
   “No! I was there!” she told him. “Paige accused Clarke of H2 but Clarke never agreed; never
confessed! And now this! We’re all in horrible, horrible danger!”
   “And we will face it together,” Jeremy assured her. “Just like we did at H2! I’ll let
McGonagall know,” he promised, “and you, keep wary, be safe and don’t take any chances!”

Jeremy walked over to Madam Pomfrey. Holly looked around to see who else hadn’t been tended. She spotted Manasa Basu (S5) curled up against the wall. She looked as if she were in a lot of pain, but Holly hadn’t noticed her presence earlier; Basu was one who did occlumency; even now Holly could sense nothing in Basu’s direction. Holly stood and headed towards her stopping to grab a couple of towels along the way.

“I don’t need you!” Basu said proudly as Holly drew near.

“O.K.,” answered Holly without emotion and changed her direction.

“Wait!” Holly paused.

“Come here!” Basu ordered.

Holly walked back towards Basu.

“Can you sense my emotions?” Basu questioned as Holly drew near.

“No.” Holly admitted as she knelt next to Basu.

“Then why do you think you can help?”

“You’re holding your elbow with your other hand; your head’s bleeding, your breathing’s ragged, blood is coming out of your nose and your leg has a bend where there shouldn’t be. It doesn’t take an Empath to see you need help. Have you sharp stabbing pains in your chest?” Basu nodded. “You probably have some broken ribs and a punctured lung,” Holly told her. “Don’t try to move until that gets taken care of.” Holly reached out. “May I?” she asked. Basu nodded. Holly took hold of the ankle and knee of the injured leg and gently straightened the leg. “That should help,” she told Basu.

Basu nodded silently.

Holly reached up and started to feel the arm Basu held. The elbow seemed unusually lumpy and out of shape. “It doesn’t feel broken,” she told Basu, “probably dislocated. You should insist on something for the pain before trying to put it back in place…”

“How do you know what to do?” Basu asked abruptly.

“First aide,” answered Holly bluntly. “I took classes over the holiday.” There was no way Holly would even consider returning on the Express without taking a First Aide and a CPR class beforehand and packing several emergency medical books, just in case… They were all in that extendable black bag Holly carried around with her, always. Holly felt gently up the rest of Basu’s arm to the shoulder and rotated the shoulder about. Basu winced, but that was probably due to the elbow not shoulder. “Shoulder’s fine,” Holly murmured. She released Basu’s shoulder. “I’m going to try to stop the bleeding,” Holly told Basu while she folded up one of the towels.

“Why don’t you release him?” Basu suddenly asked.

“Huh?” “Release who?”

“You’re nothing!” Basu declared. “Yet they flock to you like moths to a flame!”

“What?” asked Holly in confusion. Basu wasn’t making any sense at all. She had to be in shock.

“Release him from that promise!” Basu said not responding to Holly’s question. Then Holly noted Basu wasn’t looking at her as she spoke. Holly looked where Basu was looking—at Geoffrey Bromadge and Anthony Richards. Couldn’t be Bromadge, she must mean Richards! Why?

“I have released him,” Holly told Basu while she gently patted the blood away from the head wound.

“No!” argued Basu. “He clings to you at every opportunity!”

“You’re in shock,” Holly told her while wiping the blood from Basu’s face. Then Holly applied pressure at the source of the bleeding. “He doesn’t do that at all. Why would you think so?”

“He never sees me! Only you!” Basu complained. “Why won’t he look at me the way he looks at you?”

“Look at—?” Holly looked from Basu to Richards and back to Basu again. Was it possible? “You think Richards likes me?” she questioned with new understanding. As an Empath, the thought had never crossed Holly’s mind with Richards; she knew the truth of such things… But to an
outsider observing… Basu didn’t answer but Holly was certain she was right. “Believe me, you would never want Richards to look at you the way he looks at me,” Holly told Basu confidently knowing full well Richards was one who worried and watched, afraid that Holly might again attempt suicide.

“You’re just a Hufflepuff!” Basu continued disdainfully heedless of Holly’s words. “Why does he keep coming back to you?”

“There is absolutely nothing going on between us,” Holly assured Basu. “And he has absolutely no feelings for me that way… I’d know…”

“Miss Wycliff?”

Holly looked up into the eyes of Madam Pomfrey. “Yes?”

“I believe it’s time for you to learn the bone mending spell…”

“What?” Holly exclaimed faintly. “I’m not a healer…”

“No,” she agreed. “But it was brought to my attention that there was a rather nasty bone breaking incident while you were at H2 where the knowledge of a bone mending spell might have come in useful…”

“We’re not at H2!” reminded Holly.

“True,” she agreed. “But there are lots of broken bones that are in need of repair and I can’t do them all alone. I need help… Has Miss Basu a broken bone?” she continued without giving Holly a chance to refuse.

“Um, yeah, her left leg,” answered Holly self-consciously. “Uh, the ti-tibia and fibula!” Holly added remembering Madam Pomfrey liked specifics. And Holly indicated the leg she had straightened.

“Excellent. And I see you have already straightened the leg. Very good. Now, if you will hold Miss Basu’s leg still,” Holly obediently steadied the leg. “And observe closely…”

Madam Pomfrey aimed her wand at Basu’s leg and Holly “observed.” When Madam Pomfrey finished with the leg, she gave Basu something for the pain and had Holly help lie Basu flat so she could work on repairing the ribs. Finally, Madam Pomfrey showed Holly how to realign Basu’s elbow and strap it in place so it could heal properly before deciding it was time to turn their attention to another student… Basu looked much, much better. She was still on the floor in the corner but Holly had tucked a blanket around her to keep her warm until she could be safely moved.

Holly lingered behind a moment for a final word with Basu before following Madam Pomfrey. “I swear there is nothing going on between us!” Holly whispered to Basu. Basu didn’t respond; Holly wasn’t sure she was even awake, but Holly continued, just in case. “If you have feelings for Richards, then I suggest you tell him. Guys are kind of dense that way.” Holly personally knew nothing about such things, but she had heard the other Hufflepuff girls complain about the boys so the words sounded right. Then Holly hurried to catch up with Madam Pomfrey.

**********
Once upon a time there was this beautiful princess with smooth olive skin, silky long wavy black hair, and big beautiful brown eyes... No it was a sorceress, a very beautiful Sorceress with raven black hair, fair skin and ruby lips... No, it was a Queen, a beautiful queen with flowing glossy black hair, fair skin and cherry red lips, a Queen who loved her husband and daughter very much… As this story begins, the Queen lived happily with her family in a small castle on the hill.

But one sad day the King, the Queen’s husband, died. Filled with grief, the Queen carried on for the sake of her beautiful daughter. The two consoled each other over the loss and lived together, well not ‘happily, for the King was dead, but contentedly.

Meanwhile, the Queen’s mother, also a widow, pleaded much loneliness and begged her daughter, the Queen, and her daughter, the Princess, to come live with her. While the Queen was a dutiful daughter and visited her mother regularly, she resisted the notion of leaving the memories and security of her castle on the hill.

Unfortunately, hard times fell upon the Queen and her daughter so she accepted the invitation to live in the very large castle of her (the Queen’s) mother hidden within a deep dark forest.

One fateful day, the Queen found herself under attack! The Queen’s mother was also a powerful sorceress who had plans of her own for the Queen. But the Queen was a sorceress as well, not as powerful as her mother, but strong in other ways… The Queen fought back with all her might. Unfortunately, she was no match for the older, more experienced, sorceress who was her mother. When it became apparent she would loose, the Queen turned her remaining energies towards protecting her beloved daughter, the Princess…

**********

Paige Brennna Crowley stepped down the hall of St. Mungos. The hall was quiet and empty, almost. It was the Muggle ward, which explained the emptiness. Access was tightly restricted. It was evening, so the lights were dimmed. Dinner had already been served. There was only one patient in the Muggle Ward. Paige was going to see that person. This was not a social visit. Paige felt a compulsion so strong that she would have literally done anything within her ability to make this meeting happen. Paige stopped at the opened doorway and looked in. Almost immediately Paige felt compelled to do, she wasn’t sure what, but she forced herself to remain still instead. The person inside looked back.

“May I enter?” The person nodded her head. It was a politeness on both sides, a mere formality. The person couldn’t stop Paige from entering even if she wanted; a thick chain and iron cuff bound her slender wrist to the bed.

“I am Mrs. Crowley,” said Paige keeping herself calm and polite while sitting down in the chair next to the bed.

“Nadia Turay,” whispered the person.

Nadia Turay had been jubilantly cleared by the Prophet, but not by the aurors. The person in front of Paige had confessed to killing Thackeray thus clearing Paige’s name but in doing so, was now in jeopardy of being punished for that same crime. She looked like the person Paige had awakened in December, but was she? And was that enough? Inside, she could be Nadia Turay, or Regina Clarke or something entirely new born of the experiences she had endured. That was why Paige had come... Paige had almost a burning urge to know the truth, and a need to finish what she had begun. Only uncertainty stilled her hand.
Paige studied the person before her, trying to read the thoughts behind the eyes, but got nowhere. The person studied her as well, watchful and wary, but without fear. Paige drew a deep breath. She had picked up many bits and pieces, all, perhaps, to the same puzzle. Had she put them together correctly? Time to test her ideas.

“I would like to speak to Reaghan Thackeray,” Paige told the person in front of her.

Turay’s brown eyes widened in surprise. “Mum?” she whispered, “but she’s d—”

“You know who I am,” Paige continued relentlessly. “What I am; what I can do, what I will do if I must. I have questions, questions only you can answer…”

Paige remembered when Clarke’s essence had entered her body exploding with rage and intent. She had waited as long as she could until fighting back, letting her vow take over and help… Only after Paige had woken and sorted through her memories did she realize more than one essence had entered; the other had somehow slipped away during the battle. More pieces to the puzzle. It had taken longer to figure out just what, or who she had sensed.

Paige watched and waited. Nadia Turay looked back, her frozen facial expression filled with confusion…

Abruptly, the expression cleared and the face looked older, more experienced somehow. Was she now looking at Reaghan Thackeray or a very good actress? Did it matter? Only the answers did.

“You were the Dreamer, not Nadia,” accused Paige putting words to her thoughts.

Thackeray/Clarke had been Slythern. Slytherins lied frequently but there were often truths woven between their words…

The person in the bed looked back at Paige wordlessly. It wasn’t a confession; nor was it a denial.

“You made Nadia sleep, not Thackeray!” Paige accused.

“It was the only way to protect her,” spoke the person in the bed. Her voice was deeper, like that of an adult but held none of the sharpness of Regina Clarke. Her eyes glistened brightly.

Reaghan?

Paige drew in another breath. “You made H2!”

“No!”

But Paige didn’t believe her; tears flowed freely down Reaghan’s (Nadia’s) cheeks. Paige continued. “And you kidnapped the students!”

“No!”

“Is that the way with your magic?” Paige persisted. “You can only dream things, not people! So you ruthlessly took the students to fill your school!”

“No!”

“You made everyone else in the wizard community twist in agony just so Nadia could play out her fantasies!”

“It was not like that!” she exclaimed. “Never that!”

“What, then?”

“She was lonely,” Reaghan whispered. “And then, … mum,” (she spat out the word “mum,”) “started reading her old letters back to her! There were so many memories behind the words…”

Reaghan’s voice trailed off.

Paige waited.

“My baby was so unhappy!” Reaghan suddenly burst out. “Her desire was so strong—I couldn’t bear it any more. I helped her create that which she wanted so much. I helped her create Hogwarts…”

“But—the students?” questioned Paige, uncontrollable rage building within. “How could you do that to them? To us!” Paige could understand a mother helping a lonely child create a more desirable world, but kidnapping all the students to fill it…

“I didn’t!” denied Reaghan. “It was all a dream! Even the students!” she insisted.

“But you thought otherwise!”

“No!”

“Then why was it Margaret Moore who attended class, not Nadia?”
“Nooo!”


Reaghan twisted and turned her head away to face the wall. “I don’t know!”

“What do you think happened?”

Paige waited. Eventually Reaghan spoke again. “Mum must have begun reading Nadia’s old letters aloud on the day the Express took off. It was only later when she read articles from the Prophet that I learned of the disappearance of the students. When no trace of them was found, I worried that the students had found a way to enter Nadia’s dream… “

“Why didn’t you free them? End the dream?” questioned Paige with knots of need twisting and turning inside.

“I didn’t know how!” she exploded. “I had no idea how they had gotten there in the first place, if they were there, let alone how to get them out. Ending the dream could have ended them all! So I did what I could to help them instead.”

“How?”

“I kept the dream alive even when she d-dreamed of other things…” Reaghan told Paige. “And I hoped, given enough time, the Ravenclaws would figure out how to bring them all home…”

Paige nodded sympathetically. That made sense. The compulsion that she fought to control so seemed to fade in intensity.

“And Margaret Moore?”

“Mum?”

“Why did the students see her?” Paige clarified.

“If there were students, I didn’t want them seeing Nadia! This wasn’t her fault. It was … mum’s!” she spat. “But mum as mum didn’t fit into the dream. She was too old to “attend” Hogwarts.”

That made sense too, but it wasn’t enough. “Why didn’t you speak up when you woke?” Paige asked.

“It was all a guess, about the dream and students and the students were home. Speaking of it would have gotten Nadia in trouble…”

“About Thackeray and what she did to you! Your murder!” clarified Paige. It clearly had been no “magical accident” as the Death Certificate said…

“You were a Slytherin in mum’s house; I could not trust you!” Reaghan said bitterly. “How could I have ever known you were more…”

“But you let her wake?” meaning Nadia.

“I couldn’t stop it!” admitted Reaghan. “She recognized DeWitt; he’d been nice to her and she was so lonely longing for her freedom... We might have spoken to him, but then Richards came in!” Reaghan spat the name Richards. “Nadia would say nothing in front of him!”

Paige nodded again. Nadia would have only known Anthony through his actions the previous year. They would not have inspired trust. “But, at the hospital?”

“Mum’s portkey landed us outside the hospital and mum promised that she would tell everyone Nadia had kidnapped the students if we did not support her story; she said she had proof! Nadia would have been sent to Azkaban for sure.”

Paige nodded again. Sentiment against the unknown kidnappers was high then; if there were proof, Nadia would have indeed been sent to Azkaban… “How did you evade the Hospital?”

“Hospital?”

“The spells designed to reveal when someone is under the influence of magical spells?”

“I protect Nadia, not influence her,” came the disdainful answer. “Even now she does not know I am here, only that thoughts of me comfort her.”


“The Imperius Curse!” Reaghan said flatly, “and a command to “not resist!” I could no longer prevent mum taking over my baby’s body.” A look of incredible sorrow filled her face. “But I saved her mind!” she added suddenly with glittering eyes and a look of satisfaction. “She could not take Nadia’s mind! I protected it!”
“The Sorbi!” whispered Paige feeling her body relax even more.

“Mum was Slytherin!” related Reaghan. “She didn’t know the ways of the Ravenclaws. She could learn the students by matching faces with the names on “missing” photos, guess the password correctly, and attend class with ease, but the rest—she didn’t know how we Ravenclaws all watch and wait, observe without comment.”

“The memory gaps weren’t gaps at all!”

“Mum never knew when she made mistakes,” affirmed Reaghan grimly. “She didn’t have Nadia’s memories to correct her. But I knew! I saw all the little tests they gave mum, tests she failed. I could only hope someone would figure out what was wrong and find a way to save Nadia. I never expected it to be you!” she finished with a touch of wonder in her voice. “How could I? Mum was convinced you had killed her; we both were! And I joined with mum in vengeance—then I touched your mind, and realized what you were… I realized all was not as it seemed.”

“And you left!” whispered Paige. The compulsion which had filled her body seemed to dissipate completely. Paige had been so certain she had restrained herself long enough to let all the darkness enter her body; she couldn’t understand how some of it had managed to escape! But if the intent had change… That could explain things. “And now?”

“Now, my princess is safe.”

“And you?”

“Me?”

“Will you move on now that Nadia is safe?”

“I cannot,” Reaghan said in a mournful tone. “I gave my life to protect my daughter. While she lives, I shall remain with her.”

Paige nodded slowly. Reaghan was bound to Nadia, always. There were worse things, like Myrtle bound to the bathrooms. Paige studied Reaghan thoughtfully. It was a unique situation. In books, possessions had always come with dark intent that required exorcising and destruction but there was no darkness here, no dark intent—only love. Few things were stronger than a mother’s love. There were no laws governing such a thing. What to do now?

Paige drew in a beath. “Give me your hand,” she said softly and held out her hand. Reaghan looked at it questioningly for a moment and then placed her free hand in Paige’s. It felt warm and alive. Paige took Reaghan’s other hand in her left. Then she closed her eyes. Paige felt … nothing! No compulsions, no urge to destroy or fulfill her vow. She felt … nothing. That was as it should be. Paige opened her eyes. She released Reaghan’s hands. “Thank you,” she told Reaghan softly. Then Paige rose and left the room.

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“There is no Dark Magic here,” she told the people waiting outside Turay’s room. “No Dark intent.”

Wizard Dean Thomas, head of Magical Law Enforcement nodded his head and gave a mental sigh of relief. It had been the plan, after all—trick the possessor to leave Turay’s body unharmed. But plans rarely come off without a hitch, in this case, it appeared that Nadia Turay was possessed by not one, but two separate entities and the plan had eliminated only one of them!

“I expect you to drop all charges,” stated Wizard Pilkington firmly.

When Turay realized she was facing charges for the murder of Margaret Thackeray, her Grandmum, she immediately requested the services of Wizard Pilkington. With Paige Crowley cleared of those same charges, (thus no conflict of interest) Pilkington quickly accepted. Dean had heard Pilkington had already filed paperwork with Child Services for a new guardian, Turay’s current one having been requested and approved while she was possessed by Clarke…

“You would try the child for her mother’s action?” Pilkington asked when Dean didn’t answer. “Or do you wish to try the mother, who has been dead for nearly a year?”

“She’s possessed!” protested Dean.

“Only by your request,” reminded Pilkington. “I can document several nights in St. Mungos
to confirm there is no influence going on otherwise…”

“That you know of… “ muttered Dean. “And during the summer?”

“That was to protect her child. Which of us wouldn’t have done the same thing under similar circumstances? And she’s done no harm otherwise… No jury will convict!”

“H2!”

“Surely an unintended accident!” stated Pilkington smoothly. “At most, a perfect storm of events. If that. There’s no proof they caused H2 and when she suspected something had happened, Reaghan Turay acted as any responsible adult would. I would argue that because of her actions our children are alive and home!”

“She’s possessed!” repeated Dean. “Turay should be exorcised!”

“And I will immediately file an injunction preventing that,” replied Pilkington promptly.

“Such a separation is not only cruel and heartless to both mother and child but could irreparably damage Miss Turay in ways we cannot foresee.” Pilkington moved closer. “If this goes to trial, I will have to call all those witnesses to the stand and people will wonder why you chose them as witnesses… Even if you win, the cost in negative publicity will be high…”

“That’s, that’s blackmail!” sputtered Dean.

“It’s for a good cause,” answered Pilkington piously. “You and I both know the Turays are a danger to no one…” he assured Dean. “Even Mrs. Crowley does not see them as a threat and who should know better than her?”

“Perhaps she’s not a danger now,” Dean replied, “but what about next year or the year after? What if Nadia has a boyfriend mummy doesn’t like? Or she experiences the kind of break-up that sends hormonal teens into tears? What will mum do to protect her baby then?”

“Seriously? You think Reaghan would do that? I knew Reaghan!” Pilkington told Dean. “She was the kindest most gentle person…”

“Perhaps while she was alive,” replied Dean. He’d never actually met Reaghan Turay. “You saw what Regina did to Paige and she was expecting it! I’m guessing Regina did that to Reaghan and it killed her! What do you think that kind of experience does to a person? That which you once knew as Reaghan may not be the ghost that exists now.”

“I doubt that,” replied Pilkington. “Regina didn’t succeed with Reaghan! Therefore, her personality hasn’t changed with death. Reaghan behaved as a mother and not only protected her own daughter but kept all the other students alive too! How can you suggest otherwise?”

“That’s my job,” reminded Dean. “I have to think of now and the future to protect our people.”

“How about thinking of Nadia,” said Pilkington softly. “Instead of some intangible future possibility. Nadia lost her mum, nearly a year of her life, and has been brutally assaulted through possession. Now you suggest assaulting her again to remove her one solace and savior through all of this just because of something that you think might happen in the future. You saw what happened to Mrs. Crowley. She’s an adult and was expecting it. Nadia is but a child. What will that do to her? And Reaghan! How will she perceive such an attempt? Might she resist exorcism to protect her child from such horrors? You risk creating the very monster you wish to prevent. You can’t punish them for unknown possible future acts that may never happen.”

“And if some young man gets sent into oblivion because Mummy is angry and it comes out I had the chance to prevent it and didn’t! What then?”

“It won’t come out because it would never happen!” Pilkington assured Dean.

“I wish I could be as sure.”

“Then perhaps we could get the input of someone else to help you decide. Winonan, perhaps? Then, if things go wrong, (which it won’t) you always could say you acted upon his advice…”

Dean thought about it. It was a good idea. No one would fault him for acting upon medical advice.

He sighed. “Very well,” he said aloud. “I’ll consult Winonan.” But he didn’t want to. He could already guess what Winonan would say. He’d say Pilkington was right; performing an exorcism on someone as young as Nadia was dangerous. But to not exorcise ran the risk of
Reaghan’s entity becoming fused with Nadia making it even more difficult if not impossible to remove without killing Nadia… If only there were some other way to gain more assurance he was doing the right thing…

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“Hey Richards!” Anthony Richards looked up. Pilkington, Fitzpatrick, and Wycliff were coming towards him. He rose and stepped away from the dinner table meeting them part way. “What?”

“We’ve come to tell you that the “study group meeting” has been cancelled for today,” began Pilkington.

“What study group meeting?” demanded Anthony. It was his job to call the meetings, not theirs!

“The one we called for today that we just cancelled,” answered Fitzpatrick. There was this snarky grin on his face.

“Yeah, I got a message from Wizard Thomas,” filled in Wycliff. “He wants me to go to the Ministry for something, so we can’t have that meeting. Cousin Harry is already at McGonagall’s office waiting for me. Leila and Conner are taking me up to him as soon as we finish here.”

“You called me over to tell me you cancelled a meeting I didn’t even know about?” asked Anthony in disbelief.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“So you can tell Prefect Basu that we’re not meeting,” answered Wycliff.

“Basu? Why would I do that?”

“As prefect, she should know the whereabouts of the Headmistress’ Assistant, should something come up,” answered Pilkington.

“Perhaps she could help you figure out what to do with your time instead,” suggested Wycliff. “Definitely that,” stated Fitzpatrick. “Especially as you can’t travel around with Malfoy.”

Scorpius had lain on the floor that fateful day for several hours until Healer Winonan could get there. Winonan had determined the shards of broken bone had indeed done considerable damage to Scorpius’ spinal cord. He decided it would be best to heal the spinal cord before repairing the bone. The best way to do that was to remove all the bone first, heal the spinal cord and then regrow the bone.

That was a long involved process. Winonan removed the broken bones on the spot. (four shattered vertebrae) Then a very limp Scorpius had been carefully lifted and taken to the infirmary. There, he was kept flat and immobile until the spinal cord had fully healed. That had taken three days and countless different potions. At the moment, Scorpius’ bones were being regrown one by one around the spinal cord. And after that there was some sort of exercise Scorpius would have to do to make sure everything worked together correctly. It would take another three days before Pomfrey thought she might release Scorpius from the Infirmary.

It was boring visiting Scorpius. Besides his parents, Scorpius had a steady stream of girls attending to his every need, all vying for his attention. Who knew broken bones could be such a draw!

“You know what?” continued Fitzpatrick cheerfully, “I heard Professor Longbottom is giving extra credit to anyone who will go into the forbidden forest and bag the guano for use as fertilizer.”

“So?”

“Your scores could use improving,” stated Pilkington coolly. “It looks bad for the Headmistress’ Assistant to fail classes.”

“And I heard Basu wants some guano for her plant projects,” added Wycliff brightly. “Who better to help you?”

“We advise you to use this opportunity to improve your scores…” The three turned and walked out the Great Hall without another word.
Anthony watched the three leave and then returned to his place at the table.
“What was that about?” asked Basu as she reached for the hot water.

“Uh, the “Study Group” (several of the older Slytherins sniggered) is cancelled,” Anthony said repeating what they had said. Why would they have said that? Go to all the trouble to tell him?

“They cancelled?” asked Basu as she poured the water into her teacup. “On you?” Anthony knew Basu well enough to recognize the repressed anger in her tone.

“Yeah, well not really,” he told her dismissively. “Wycliff got a note telling her to meet with Thomas at the Ministry today so I had to cancel...” Better than repeating what they really said.

“Guess I’m free for the day…” he concluded as he reached for another roll. That was no surprise as Anthony hadn’t intended on going to any Study Group meeting anyway. Then, on impulse, Anthony added, “Uh, did you hear, Longbottom is offering extra credit to students willing to bag some guano for his plants? Like anyone would want to muck around with bat poop?” Anthony laughed aloud at the suggestion.

“Tisn’t mucking if you know your spells!” said Basu disdainfully. She’d added her tea leaves and was waiting for them to steep.

“Seriously?” asked Anthony with interest. His scores in Herbology were rather of low…

“Like what spells?”

“The kind I would never mention aloud…” Basu removed the leaves with a spoon and placed them in the saucer.

Anthony nodded. One never gave out information without reason… “I remember when the Potter clan dug up the guano,” he told her as he buttered his roll. “They positively stank when they returned.” Several of his classmates laughed in remembrance. “You saying it doesn’t have to be that way?”

“Course not! Anyone who walks about stinking doesn’t deserve to call himself a wizard!” Anthony took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. “It’s not like I need the credit or anything,” he told her dismissively. “But it’d be kind of cool to show them how it should have been done… Think you could show me the spells?”

Basu sighed. “I suppose we could bag some for my garden…” she answered thoughtfully.

“And I do have some time today…”

“Great!” said Anthony brightly. “So do I. After lunch?”

“O.K.”

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“Thank you so much for taking the time to come here,” began Wizard Thomas, Head of Magical Law Enforcement, after Holly Wycliff and Cousin Harry had sat down in the chairs across the desk from him. “Would you, ah, like a pin?” he questioned while reaching for his boutonniere.

“No, sir, that’s not necessary today,” Holly told him. There had been just the three of them when she had poked Wizard Thomas during their last meeting. She was fairly certain Wizard Thomas would not mention that incident with anyone else; she hadn’t and she knew Cousin Harry wouldn’t. The fact that he offered was evidence enough.

“That’s good,” he said looking visibly relieved. “I expect you’re wondering why I asked you here today.”

Holly nodded.

“It’s about Turay,” he began hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“Yes. I know the Prophet has given the impression that Winonan hasn’t released her from St. Mongo’s yet, but actually it’s me.”

“You?”

“Yes. I’m not comfortable letting her go until we are sure there is nothing to worry about.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, is there?” Holly asked worriedly.

“Physically, no,” agreed Wizard Thomas. “But when we last spoke, you indicated there was something not quite the same with Miss Turay. I’d really appreciate it if you would speak with Miss Turay and see if you still feel that way…”

“I can’t do that,” protested Holly. “Turay, Nadia, practices Occ—”

“Occlumency?” finished Wizard Thomas. “Actually, I don’t think she does. I think it was Regina Clarke who took that Occlumency test. If I’m right, then you be able to talk with the Nadia Turay you remember and have a chance to sort out what you sensed earlier…”

“I suppose I can try,” said Holly uncertainly.

“That’s all I ask,” assured Wizard Thomas.

“You’re leaving something out, aren’t you, Dean,” said Cousin Harry suspiciously.

Wizard Thomas paused. “Yes,” he finally admitted. “But I would rather Holly talk with Miss Turay without any preconceived notions I may have… We can talk about what I think later…”

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Wizard Dean Thomas, Head of Magical Law Enforcement, rose. “If you’ll come with me…” he told Holly Wycliff. Holly and Harry rose.

“You can remain behind, Harry,” Dean suggested.

“That’s O.K.,” answered Harry. “I haven’t seen the new facilities. I want to see if it matches the description.”

Dean rolled his eyes. He wondered what Paige had said about the facility. “It shouldn’t,” Dean told Harry aloud. “We’ve made changes since then.”

“Of course,” agreed Harry.

Dean led the two into the restricted section of the Ministry. It took the accompaniment of an auror to get in. They walked down several corridors of a shifting maze passageway before stopping at a heavy wood door with burnished brass fittings flanked on either side by a double row of black bricks. “No visitor wands beyond this point,” Dean said and held out his hand to Harry expectantly. “Or you can wait here,” he suggested.

Harry sighed and drew out his wand. Dean took the wand and pressed the tip lightly against one of the bricks. The brick seemed to open up revealing a small shelf. Dean placed the wand inside and removed his hand. The surface of the brick reappeared only it was red, not black. “Put your fingers on the outside,” he instructed. “And it will only reopen on your touch.” Harry did. The brick
turned black.

“What if I forget which brick?” questioned Harry.

“Then I get to watch you press all the bricks looking for it,” replied Dean in a dead-pan voice.

“Thanks,” said Harry dryly.

“Any time. Now you,” Dean said turning to Holly holding out his hand.

She drew her wand and gave to Dean. Dean took the wand and then held out his hand again.

“And your other wand?” he said sternly remembering how she had used it against him in the tunnels earlier. “And your third wand?” Dean added remembering what Luna had said. Holly flushed all the way up to the tips of her ears. She slowly reached down and produced a third wand. Dean took the wand. “Were you going to tell me about this?” he demanded waving the three wands in front of Harry’s nose.

“Don’t have to,” Harry answered with a straight face but Dean was certain Harry was laughing inside.

Dean turned back to Holly. “Any more?” he asked her sternly.

“No,” she whispered keeping her eyes fixed on the ground.

Dean looked to Harry for confirmation.

“None that I know of,” he answered with an air of innocence.

“Yes!” thought Dean sarcastically. He could see they would have to develop a wand-revealing spell and fast! Perhaps he could put Ravindra on it. She was available and good with odd assignments.

Dean brought the wands up to a brick. He tapped the wand lightly against the surface and space opened for the wand. “Uh, these are designed to hold only one wand each,” Dean told Holly. “So I’m afraid we’ll have to do this three times….”

“Yes, sir,” whispered Holly still keeping her head down. She looked up long enough to see where Dean had placed each wand and then obediently placed her fingers on the outside of the bricks as soon as Dean had filled them with a wand…

Dean drew out a heavy brass key, unlocked the door and opened it. He waited until Holly and Harry had gone through. The door swung shut and locked behind him with a resounding double click. It looked like average magic, but actually it was all done by an auror on duty under a disillusionment charm. Shutting and locking the door confirmed to Dean she was there. If the door didn’t shut or there was only a single click then Dean knew something was amiss. Dean didn’t mention the auror’s presence to the others. What they didn’t know, they couldn’t tell… Hopefully, others trying to sneak in wouldn’t know about her either…

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“Holly!” greeted Nadia Turay enthusiastically when they rounded the corner and came in view of the holding cell. Turay still had on the clothes she had worn to Thackeray’s house, but her hair was now a curly ball of frizz looking much as Dean Thomas remembered from the previous year at the Memorial Ceremony.

Holly immediately backed up bumping into Dean forcing him (and her) to abruptly stop.

“Who are you?” Holly demanded in a suspicious sounding voice.

“Who are you?” echoed Dean in alarm. That wasn’t right. Holly had positively identified the person she sensed in Thackeray’s house as Nadia and now this?

A look of confusion crossed Turay’s face. “What do you mean? It’s me, Nadia!”

“No it isn’t!” insisted Holly, “It can’t be! Who are you?”

“Reaghan!” thought Dean. “She’s taken over and Holly doesn’t recognize that emotion. And she said she’d never interfere with Nadia’s life! I knew we should have exorcised her immediately despite the lack Dark intent! What’s going on just isn’t right!”

“Of course it’s me!” said the person who looked like Nadia. “Why would you think it isn’t?”

“Because you’re not!” exploded Holly. “I know Nadia and it’s not you! What have you done to Naida?”
“Not me?” echoed the person in front of Dean and Holly. Her expression was filled with confusion and pain. “How can you say that? What have they done to you that you would think that? Can’t you see—”

She broke off. The person who looked like Nadia turned around. Dean could only see her back, but he could hear all sorts of sounds, whispered words too soft to understand. A Spell? Abruptly the person turned around and again faced Dean and Holly. “Better?” she asked Holly.

Nothing seemed even remotely different to Dean, but he saw Holly’s head slowly nod up and down.

“I’ve got to explain some things to you,” the person softly said addressing Holly. “You, not them!” she added nodding her head at Dean and the auror guards, both of whom had risen in alarm when Holly had spoken.

Holly looked at the aurors and then at Dean. “Let me in,” she told Dean.

“No,” said Dean firmly. He had a sudden vision of Reaghan looking for a way out, seeing Holly as the perfect path...

“She’ll be O.K.,” the person who looked like Nadia promised Dean.

But Dean didn’t believe her, couldn’t afford to believe her; too much was at stake. “No,” he repeated.

Holly stepped forward anyway, nearer. The person who looked like Nadia reached out and took hold of the bars clearly unaffected by the anti-bars ward. That was not good!

“Don’t touch!” Dean ordered sharply to Holly drawing his wand in alarm.

Holly stopped and looked questioningly at Dean. “I want to talk to Nadia,” she told Dean, “In private.”

Dean shook his head. “My place, my rules,” he told Holly firmly. Perhaps Reaghan lied when she said she was bound to Nadia. Perhaps all she had to do was touch Holly to take possession… Perhaps it had already happened!

Holly took another step forward. “Stop or I will stop you,” warned Dean.

“I am only trying to do what you asked,” replied Holly firmly. She took another step forward.

“Holly!” came Harry’s low voice. She froze mid-step. “This place is filled with aurors with twitchy fingers. If you take another step forward, I will be forced to conclude more than sheer stupidity moves your feet and help Dean,” he warned.

“I can’t talk to Nadia from here with everyone listening in,” Holly persisted.

“Muffliato!” said Harry bluntly. “Stay there and Dean’ll cast a Muffliato spell, won’t you?”

“Oh, yeah,” agreed Dean. “No,” he corrected himself. “It’s too far between them and she can’t come closer.” He did not want to risk the two touching.

“Not if you joined forces,” suggested Harry, “as we did to destroy the wands…”

“I suppose we could try…” Dean looked at the two auror guards questioningly. They nodded their heads indicating a willingness to try...

Holly nodded slowly. She sank to her knees; the girl behind the bars did the same. “Ready,” said Holly looking up expectantly at Dean.

Dean nodded. The two other auror guards came forward. He lifted his wand. “On the count of three,” he told them; they nodded and raised their wands. “One, two, Muffliato!” he shouted with the other aurors. Dean lowered his arm. Did it work? He had no idea. Then he saw Turay’s lips move but heard nothing.

**********

“What up?” whispered Harry in Dean Thomas’ ear while Holly and Turay talked.

“Later,” Dean whispered back hoping Harry would forget to ask again. Dean wasn’t sure how much he should say about any of this; maybe he wouldn’t have to when it was over.

It wasn’t long, maybe fifteen-twenty minutes, but it seemed like an eternity. Eventually, Holly stood breaking the Muffliato spell. She turned and faced Dean.

“You can let Nadia go, now,” she told Dean firmly.
“I can, can I?” questioned Dean softly.
“Yes.”
“Just like that?”
“Yes.”
“But you said it wasn’t Nadia,” persisted Dean.
“That’s all been clarified,” Holly said firmly.
“Not to me.”
“It was a misunderstanding,” Holly said dismissively. “That’s all.”
“Was it?”
“Yes. You scared her! Moved Nadia out of the hospital in the middle of the night into, here! The middle of the night!” Holly scolded. “Seriously? She was afraid you’d start an exorcism and is positive it would destroy Nadia, an opinion I happen to agree with,” Holly added matter-of-factly.
“You do? Why?” Dean was fairly certain Holly knew nothing about exorcisms.
“I don’t know what you do for an exorcism,” Holly admitted, “but it won’t work right because she isn’t a ghost!”
“No?”
“No. I can’t sense ghosts!” Holly said flatly.
“And you can sense her?”
“She went into protection mode!” Holly said avoiding the question. “This wouldn’t have happened if you had left them alone.”
“Ravindra was right,” thought Dean. “She’s touchy about her abilities. But if Holly can sense her presence, then she can tell intent, honest or dishonest.” “She interfered,” Dean said aloud.
“It was a defensive shield, nothing more,” Holly assured him. “Nadia knew nothing about it until I arrived. There was no interference…”
“But Nadia knows now and she supposedly didn’t before?”
“Of course she does; you told her!”
“I?” questioned Dean. “No, I didn’t.” he denied.
“Yes, you did, the moment you let Paige walk into that hospital room asking questions…” Holly assured him. “Nadia’s a Ravenclaw, after all,” Holly reminded Dean, “and she has had a lot of time to think… And right now her biggest worry is finishing out the year!”
“The year?” echoed Dean in surprise.
“Yes. Nadia missed the fall completely, and the placement test she supposedly took in the spring is a joke because “Regina” took it not Nadia! It’s going to be a nightmare sorting out what Nadia knows from what Regina knew for scoring purposes. Realistically, Nadia should retake the placement test and then find a way to re-submit or make-up all assignments and exams since the Spring term began… It would be the easiest thing to make her repeat the year. But that’s not what Nadia wants. She wants to advance to the next year with the rest of her class and she doesn’t want it to be some “charity” promotion! Cousin Harry,” Holly added directing her attention at Harry. “Would you be willing to take Nadia back to Hogwarts with me?”
“Uh, is it OK?” Harry asked Dean in an uncertain voice. “We’d have to touch…”
“That’s a bunch of nonsense!” interrupted Holly firmly to Dean. “I asked. You’re just being paranoid!”
“Look who’s talking!” retorted Dean.
Holly blinked. “But I really have a reason to be paranoid!” she said brightly, “You don’t. Not about this. Well?”
Dean thought briefly. “Why not?” he said easily. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his key. “You may do the honours,” he told Holly and handed the key to her. Her face broke into a sunny smile. She turned and practically ran to the cell door to unlock it.
“You sure about this?” questioned Harry worriedly as Holly and Turay hugged.
“Yeah,” answered Dean with confidence. “Winonan’s already signed off on releasing her; it was mostly me doing a double check; you can never be too sure. We deliberately put her under a lot of stress just to see what would happen and the most she did was a bit of Occlumency. If you take
Turay now she’ll be out of here before Pilkington’s *Writ of Habeas Corpus* hits my desk Monday morning (Dean’s Ministry sources had already told him Pilkington had launched an inquiry on the whereabouts of Turay; a writ was the logical next step.) and I can tell him he’s too late!” Dean smiled at the thought. “It’ll be nice to be ahead of Pilkington for once!”

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Anthony Richards leaned up against a thick oak tree and watched Manasa Basu pick up her small extendable bag. Basu was wearing some sort of dark orange and blue and green coloured long sleeved tunic trimmed with gold braid and covered with tiny mirrors affixed to the fabric. The tunic was over a tight fitting dark red-orange coloured pants that resembled leggings, only, Anthony had never before seen red-orange coloured leggings before. Nor had he ever realized how slender Basu’s ankles were. Basu wore her shiny black hair long, loose and flowing; the part above her eyes was curled somehow and pulled away from her face. A flowing blue and red-orange scarf, two slender gold chains around her neck, gold bracelets and bangly gold earrings completed the outfit. Anthony had stared in surprise when he saw Basu after lunch.

“Uh, weren’t we going after guano?” he asked uncertainly.

“Of course,” she answered proudly.

“But, um, your clothes?”

“They’re new!” she announced cheerfully. “Like them?” Basu swirled around once for his inspection. The long scarf floated lightly on the air and Anthony caught a glimpse of a cluster of white flowers decorating the back of her hair as she moved!

“Uh, yeah, but, are you sure you should be wearing them for guano?”

“Why not?” Basu answered airily. “I’m not planning on getting dirty...”

Anthony had a map to the guano (courtesy Pilkington.) It was a beautiful sunny spring day and the two decided to use brooms and fly rather than walk. Neither had flown since H2. Basu wanted to sit sideways; she nearly fell getting on and Anthony had to help her regain her balance. The flowers in her hair smelled incredibly sweet and her waist was surprisingly tiny!

It took longer than Anthony expected to reach the guano site; things looked different from the air and Basu insisted on making several stops along the way to pick flower and plant samples. She also had him shake the leafy oak branches they encountered so she could collect the pollen for research. But Anthony didn’t mind the extra time spent along the way. He was too busy telling Basu all about his operation to trick Turay and his plans for an exclusive Inn at Hogsmeade... Basu was really interested and frequently praised his courage and ingenuity.

Later on, Basu told him stories about her life in India and her grandmother who taught her all those gardening spells. Anthony had always considered stories about other people a bore, but Basu was different. Her stories were actually interesting! And as she spoke, Anthony realized he kind of liked the sound of her voice; it was so musical. Basu’s voice had always sounded so stern and proper at the castle—that had to be just her pref...ect voice. After a while, it occurred to Anthony that he didn’t care what Basu said; he just liked listening to her speak. Basu, no Manasa, that was her first name... She said it meant “spiritual.” Anthony didn’t know so much about that but Manasa did look a bit like a free spirit flying on her broom with her scarf flowing out behind.

Bagging the guano was as simple as Manasa had predicted. She pulled out some shovels from her extendable bag and proceeded to use some of the muggle cooking spells out of Charms class. She had already pre-spelled several smaller non-extendable bags with a lemon scent to cover the sharp ammonia scent of the guano. They also captured and jarred four huge silvery centipedes; Anthony was certain Paige would like to harvest their venom.

The two quickly filled their bags with the guano without letting a speck of it get on themselves! They bagged all the guano they could find; why let anyone else benefit? Anthony figured, and Manasa agreed, that they could divide the excess guano, bag it and pass it out to any First who wanted it for extra credit. Longbottom had never specified how much guano would earn the extra credit, nor did his promise specify the students actually had to collect it themselves… The
Firsts had helped and supported both Anthony and Manasa throughout the year. It never hurt to show their appreciation, especially when it was this easy to do.

When they had finished bagging the guano and had stacked it in a neat pile ready to be carried out of the woods, Manasa pulled out a blanket and suggested they take time for a spot of tea... From a second extendable bag she pulled out a teapot and two teacups. It wasn’t the usual fat porcelain teapot but a tall skinny brass pot with a long handle and spout decorated in green and gold. Manasa said it was her grandmothers’. While the tea steeped, Manasa brought out an assortment of biscuits to share. Well, no, they weren’t all the usual biscuits. She also brought out something small that was both sweet and spicy she called a kachori. Definitely different and not all that bad.

Manasa opened her extendable bag and carefully placed the green and gold tea set inside. He liked watching her move. The mirrors on her tunic caught the shafts of sun that shone through the leaves and sparkled like diamonds. Manasa shook out the blanket and began to fold it when Anthony heard a loud rustle of leaves off to his left. He turned his head and looked. Spider!

The spider was about the size of a large dog. Anthony drew his wand and stood in alarm. Spiders were nasty. “I think it’s time to leave,” he told Manasa. She took one look at the spider, hastily stuffed the blanket in her bag and drew her own wand. A loud rustle in a different direction alerted Anthony to a second spider! Instinctively, Anthony reached his free hand out for his broom. Nothing! His broom wasn’t up against the tree where he had placed it! Neither was Manasa’s! A third rustle in a new direction caused Anthony to move closer to Manasa. As he did more spiders came into view. Anthony counted six dog-sized ones and saw larger ones behind them! They were surrounded!

Abruptly Anthony’s wand flew out of his hand and vanished from sight. “What?” Anthony saw Manasa’s wand fly out of her hand too! “Accio!” Anthony cried out holding his wand hand out in the direction his wand had flown. Nothing! Meanwhile, the spiders moved closer. “There’s someone out there!” thought Anthony with alarm. “Someone using a disillusionment charm and silent spells!” It was nearly impossible to defend against an unseen enemy… He had to find that person! Anthony looked around for ideas. He saw the bags of guano stacked nearby. He moved swiftly to them. “Help me!” he told Manasa as he untied the nearest bag and plunged his hand inside. He pulled out a handful of guano and threw it into the air in the direction he had seen his wand fly. “This won’t slow the spiders,” Manasa told him while Anthony pulled out another handful of guano and tossed it into the air in the direction Manasa’s wand had flown.

“No,” Anthony agreed, “but we might find the person who did this!” Corner had found him in the halls this way… Anthony tossed out another handful. “Look!” he said pointing: some of the guano seemed suspended in the air. Anthony drew his wand, his second wand. “Stupify!” he shouted at the suspended clump of guano. The clump went flying; the spider beyond slid further back as if pushed by some invisible force.

“Stupify!” shouted Manasa.

“What?” thought Anthony in surprise. “She has a second wand too?” Out of the corner of his eye Anthony saw one of the spiders slide back pushing away the others behind it. But more spiders rushed in to fill the space created.

Then, to Anthony’s dismay, he saw a broom, his broom—two brooms shoot up into the air and soar out of sight. They were alone now. Alone, except for a bunch of huge spiders! Angry? Hungry? He didn’t know, but they had surrounded them and were getting bolder, advancing steadily; there were too many to take out one at a time.

“Any ideas on how to get rid of the spiders?” questioned Anthony aloud. He couldn’t actually see Manasa, they had moved back-to-back for defense.


“No, problem,” Anthony replied. Their backs were near touching and any movement would take him directly into the spiders.

“Engorgio!” she shouted. Anthony twisted his head to look and saw something green and gold rear up out of the corner of his eye. It looked like a snake, but was huge—over five meters in
length and strangely flat instead of round. The effect was immediate. The spiders backed away. The "snake" fell onto the ground and kind of slithered towards the nearest spider. It backed away but couldn’t go far because of all the other spiders behind it. The spider turned and started crawling on top of the other spiders in its effort to get away. The "snake" lifted its upper body, opened its jaws wide and bit down managing to sink its teeth into the nearest part, in this case, what looked to be the stomach of the spider. The spider immediately folded its legs beneath it and curled into a ball.

"Gemini!" shouted Manasa. More "snakes" appeared, each falling on the ground moving in strange awkward slithers towards the spiders. The spiders backed away; then turned and fled. The "snakes" followed. Abruptly all the "snakes" vanished but one. It collapsed and lay on the ground unmoving. Manasa pointed her wand at the "snake." "Reducto!" she commanded. The snake shrank down until it was nothing more than a small flat green and yellow strip that curled into a circle about 15 centimeters in diameter. Manasa stepped to the strip. She picked it up and stroked its back. The band immediately uncurled and then wound itself up her arm.

"That thing poisonous?" questioned Anthony as he cautiously touched the curled up spider with his foot.

"No," Manasa answered. "There’s a sleeping potion in the venom bags. I didn’t know how to change it." The spider legs quivered unexpectedly. "I’m not sure how well the potion works in an "enlarged" state..." she added thoughtfully. One of the fangs twitched.

"Then I recommend we leave before it wakes," said Anthony while eying the spider apprehensively.

"Walk?"

"Not if we can help it," decided Anthony aloud. "The spiders will come back." Even as he spoke, Anthony could sense movement beyond, that of spiders returning. "Potter had all the students making brooms," he added thoughtfully. "Surely we can do as well."

"They took days to construct them," Manasa reminded.

"They were mostly firsts and seconds," observed Anthony disdainfully. "It would take them forever to do anything!"

"True," agreed Manasa. "But I hate to leave the guano behind..."

"Never!" agreed Anthony proudly. He moved over to the guano and retied the opened bag. He handed the bags to Manasa who placed them in her extendable bag along with the shovels. "But we may need something a bit larger and stronger than a regular broom..." he added speculatively.

"What did you have in mind?"

Anthony looked about. His eyes lit upon a dead branch in the oak he had been leaning against. The branch was fairly straight, for an oak branch, about as thick as his wrist and had lots of bushy dead twigs on one end. He raised his wand and aimed. "Diffendo!" The branch cracked and fell to the ground with a loud crash.

"Mmm. Kind of heavy," Manasa murmured. "And I doubt the twigs would sweep away much..."

"True," agreed Anthony thoughtfully. He raised his wand again and aimed near the "bushy" end. "Diffendo!" he said breaking off the bushy part. "Help me gather some sweeping twigs," he commanded. He and Manasa scanned the nearby area and began picking up sweeping type twigs. When they had collected enough to make a respectable bundle, Anthony lined them all up at the base of the stick.

"Use my scarf," suggested Manasa and she handed him her bright blue and orange-red scarf.

"Thanks," said Anthony. He wound the scarf around the twigs several times making sure the twigs were evenly distributed around the branch. Then he knotted the scarf tightly. "What do you think?" asked Anthony when he had finished. He stood as some larger spiders came into view, watching. The curled up spider’s legs started straightening.

"It looks good," said Manasa approvingly, "but can you lift it?"

Anthony confidently held his hand over the branch. "Up!" he commanded. The branch kind of quivered. Out of the corner of his eye Anthony saw the spider waving its legs and rocking its body clearly trying to stand. The other spiders began moving towards it, towards them...
Then a lightly tanned hand with slender fingers and sparkly blue fingernails appeared next to his hand. “Again,” the musical voice next to him said.

Anthony straightened. “On three,” he directed. “One, two, UP!” The branch rose, high enough to mount. Anthony gripped the branch, slipped his leg over the branch and scooted back to make room for Manasa. She took hold of the branch, turned and sat sideways on it. The spider rolled back on his feet and started walking unsteadily towards them. Anthony wrapped one arm around Manasa and took a firm grip of a part of the branch in front of her with the other. He ignored the sweet scent of her hair and urged the branch/broom up…

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“I didn’t know you carried a second wand,” stated Anthony Richards conversationally as they flew. They were flying low and slow, scarcely above the treetops. The branch was unwieldy and difficult to direct, but it moved, which was what mattered.

“It seemed advisable,” replied Manasa briefly. “And you?”

Anthony shrugged. Well, it was a mental shrug as an actual shrug would have skewed them off balance. “Wycliff’s paranoia is contagious,” he told her lightly.

“Paranoia?” questioned Manasa.

“Yeah,” he answered. “I have to watch her constantly to make sure she doesn’t do something stupid!”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s good.”

“Good?”

“Uh, that you’re so responsible and uh, diligent.”

“Oh.” Anthony straightened a bit, mentally—he had always known he was responsible and diligent, but no one had ever told him that before.

Then Manasa moved her body closer to his, “I’m cold,” she murmured. Anthony instinctively moved his body closer to hers; he wasn’t really cold but it felt nicer that way.

“Wycliff thinks the kidnappers are still out there, still after us,” Anthony said while enjoying the soft warmth of Manasa’s body,

“Oh?”

“Yes, but I’m beginning to think these attacks are more personal in nature…”

“I agree. Any idea who?”

“Yeah. But how to prove it…”

“And what do we do about it?”

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Chapter 48

The sun was setting when the oversized broom with a bright blue and orange-red scarf streaming in back flew in carrying Richards and Basu. Head Boy Jeremy Corner noted the arrival as did everyone else out on the lawn. Hard to miss.

“Nice broom,” commented prefect Alyssa Moore (R) loudly as the two dismounted letting the creation drop to the ground. “You make it yourself?” Moore was seated on the lawn with several other students, mostly Ravenclaws, who were studying while enjoying the spring weather.

“None of your business!” snapped Richards proudly. He untied the scarf letting the whole contraption fall apart and gallantly handed the scarf to Basu. She wrapped it around her neck and took hold of Richard’s elbow. The two started walking towards the castle. Usually Richards walked past Jeremy as if he wasn’t there, but not this time. Abruptly Richards wheeled and turned around. He marched up to Jeremy. “You’ve pollen on your clothes!” he accused. “You been out in the woods?”


“With the bats?” Richards asked pointedly.

Jeremy Corner closed his book and stood. He could tell this would be a longer conversation and he didn’t like people towering over him when he was speaking or others listening in, for that matter. Jeremy stepped up close to Anthony invading his personal space forcing Anthony to step back and move away from the other students. “Yeah,” Jeremy answered.

Both Richards and Basu had been attacked in the past. Putting the two together in a remote location was like waving a red flag in front of an angry bull. Something bad was bound to happen. As soon as he heard about the trip (Bromadge, Geoffrey) had told his sister who told him) Jeremy had grabbed his broom and headed towards the bat trees. He selected a rather tall oak and constructed a magical blind where he could wait and watch unobserved. Jeremy didn’t see anyone until Basu and Richards arrived. After witnessing the moves Basu was putting on Richards, Jeremy was fairly certain collecting guano was not her purpose for the trip. It was sickening how Richards was taking it all in. Then the spiders appeared.

“And you didn’t help?” demanded Richards.

“Help the spiders? Now why would I do that?”

“Us!” demanded Basu moving close to Anthony. “You didn’t help us!” she said accusingly.

It was clear she thought Jeremy had aided the spiders, if only through his inaction.

“Jump into a cluster of overgrown spiders with the two of you casting spells every direction? No way!” stated Jeremy bluntly. “I’ve no hero complex! Besides, I figured you had it covered with your other wand. Didn’t know about yours, though,” he added directing his attention back to Richards.

“So you just stood back and watched!” stated Anthony angrily. “Didn’t think you were that cold!”

“I would have loved to watch,” answered Jeremy honestly, “but I thought I’d go after your brooms, instead…” Jeremy had only seen the spiders. He hadn’t realized the brooms were missing until Richards started looking for them. The wands flying off had caught him totally by surprise. When he saw the brooms swoop up, Jeremy barely had enough time to grab his own and follow.

“Brooms!” stated Richards sharply. “Where are they?” They all knew the brooms would be with the person who took them...

“With the centaurs!” The two stared at Jeremy in total astonishment. “Seems they don’t like anything in their air space…” Jeremy added filling the silence. The centaurs had done some fancy shooting with their bows and arrows; he’d narrowly missed being shot down too!

“Now?” questioned Richards in open disbelief.

“Uh, sort of…” Jeremy answered. “They didn’t seem worth retrieving after the centaurs set
them on fire…” Jeremy paused and then added, “The centaurs seemed pretty angry…” his voice trailed off.

“And you left her there?” asked Basu.

“Her?” asked Jeremy aloud in an innocent sounding voice. “They knew!” Clearly more had gone on between Richards and Basu besides “cuddling” on the way back.

“The person flying the brooms!” clarified Richards angrily.

“I never saw anyone fly the brooms,” answered Jeremy honestly. “Just someone appear on the ground after they shot down the brooms,” but he didn’t say that part aloud. “And I’m positive there is no one in the centaur village except centaurs.” Jeremy added. “Now.”

“So where is she?” Richards demanded.

“Who?”

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The stars twinkled brightly against the dark moonless sky. “Lumos!” Anthony Richards said. A bright light erupted from his wand and he held it high to light his way. He slowed and stopped when he came to a huge 1 x 1 meter board lying on the ground. Anthony extinguished his light, aimed his wand and shouted, “Wingardium Leviosa!” The board floated gently up breaking a Muffliato spell and revealing a dark black hole beneath.

“She “fell” in this hole out by the greenhouse on the way back,” Corner had said lightly. Anthony was certain that was the one Manasa and Febland had fallen into.

“I thought that was filled in!”

“Nah, I just covered it over and sealed it in case we needed it for evidence later,” came the response. “Or other things…” Corner added ominously.

“Lumos!” Anthony said again lighting his wand. He held it out over the hole. A mud streaked face looked up at him, Olivia O’Shea. “There you are!” exclaimed Anthony with a deliberate relief sound to his voice… “Everyone’s been looking for you! What are you doing in here?”

“What am I?” she sputtered. “Get me out of here!”

“Of course!” Anthony extinguished his light. “Winguardian Leviosa!” he shouted aiming his wand where O’Shea had been. Anthony reached out. Soon he felt a shoulder, and an arm… Anthony pocketed his wand, grabbed the arm and guided O’Shea out of the hole and onto the ground next to it.

“You’re cold!” Anthony exclaimed solicitously. “Here!” He whipped off his robe and wrapped it around her. Then Anthony reached into his pocket and pulled out a small flagon. “Drink this,” he suggested as he uncorked the flagon. “It’ll make you feel better.”

“What is it?” O’Shea asked as Anthony placed the flagon in her hand.

“Butterbeer!” Anthony identified proudly. “Never without it—just in case…”

“Just in case” was the phrase everyone used in reference to H2—all those things they wished they’d had, but hadn’t while at H2. Butterbeer was not one of them for Anthony, but the explanation sounded good. He sensed rather than saw O’Shea taking a drink. “Have some more,” Anthony offered. “You need it.” He heard the unmistakable sounds of O’Shea drinking more…

“What happened?” Anthony asked with concern when she had finished. He recorked the flagon and placed it back in his pocket.

“I don’t know! One minute I was in the centaur camp screaming for my life and the next—”

“Centaurs!” interrupted Anthony sharply. “The centaurs did this?”

“I don’t know,” answered O’Shea. “They must have! I mean I was with them last…”

“We’ve got to tell McGoangall!” exclaimed Anthony. “They can’t be allowed to get away with this! Tell me what happened—everything!”

“They shot me down!” exclaimed O’Shea angrily. “And then they—”
“Wait a minute, they shot you down?”
“Yes!”
“They were at Hogwarts?”
“Of course not! I was flying over their village!”
“But, that’s against the rules!” Anthony exclaimed. “What on earth were you doing that for?”
There was this silence, and then, “I was trying to dump the brooms!” exploded O’Shea angrily. “What do you think?” She shouldn’t have said that but it was too late now.
Anthony nodded sympathetically as if O’Shea’s words were no big deal. They weren’t. The admission actually made sense. Proving it had been the problem...

“And you left her in there?” asked Manasa.
“It’s a very deep hole,” Corner replied. “Haven’t figured how to get her out yet...”
“You haven’t?” echoed Anthony in disbelief. Surely Corner was smarter than that.
“Yeah, I thought I should consult you about the best way to do that first...”
“Me?” Anthony echoed in disbelief. Corner never "consulted" him about anything.
“Yes. You see, I never actually saw anyone with the spiders besides you and Basu,”

Corner began, “or with the brooms
for that matter. A good solicitor would argue none of that was her doing, a mere coincidence; she was out in the woods at the
same time...”

“Don’t you think you should have been a little less obvious if you were planning to blame the Centaurs?” Anthony scolded.
“I was under a disillusionment spell!” O’Shea complained. “How was I to know they spend their time staring up in the sky!”
“The fact Firenze does it all the time wasn’t a clue?” Anthony asked dryly.
“Firenze is a freak!” O’Shea stated scornfully. “I didn’t think they were all like that!”
“An understandable mistake,” said Anthony in a sympathetic voice. “Of course, it would have been smarter to not visit the Centaurs at all seeing as it’s against the rules... So why did you?”
There was another long silence but Anthony waited patiently. He was certain O’Shea’s need to confess would win out over conventional wisdom.
“Because I promised!” she finally blurted.
“Promised?” questioned Anthony in surprise. That was not the answer he expected.
“Promised who?”
“The spiders!” she exploded. “I was using a disillusionment spell to get to the bats, but the spiders, they caught me anyway! And took me to their cave! I had to promise them more food to get them to let me go!”
“Us?” whispered Anthony controlling his anger with difficulty. That O’Shea had sold them out to the spiders!
“Yes! It wouldn’t have been for long,” she hastened to assure Anthony. “I knew where the cave was! I was going to go to the cave and rescue you after I had gotten rid of the brooms and wands...” Her voice trailed off no doubt remembering Anthony had used his wand to get her out of the hole, perhaps wondering how he had gotten it. “And I would be the hero!” O’Shea whispered.
“Hero?” echoed Anthony.
“Yes, everyone would talk about how great I am instead of you!”
“And in the hall?” questioned Anthony softly. “Were you going to “rescue” me too?”
“Course!” she answered promptly. “Cept Corner found you first!”
“Barely in time,” remembered Anthony. “And outside the greenhouse, were you going to “rescue” M-Basu?”
There was a long silence. “You shouldn’t have made her prefect,” O’Shea said instead.
“You shouldn’t have tried to steal the food!” replied Anthony.
“It would have worked!” persisted O’Shea.
“We were outnumbered!” reminded Anthony.
“You shouldn’t have chosen her!” repeated O’Shea.
“She had the qualities I needed,” replied Anthony, which, at the time, was the ability to make an extendable room…

“She’s nothing!” replied O’Shea in a hateful voice.
“Basu is everything!” argued Anthony, “She saved us all at H2! You could have never grown any food and you know it!” And as he spoke, he realized he meant it, every word. Anthony wondered why he never thought of that before.
“I didn’t know things were going to last that long!” O’Shea protested. “And she could have grown the food without being the prefect! That title was mine!”
“That title came with responsibilities!” reminded Anthony. “Responsibilities you weren’t willing to do.”
“And after H2?” questioned O’Shea. “I was fine at Hogwarts!”
“You drew a wand on me!” stated Anthony. “How could I ever trust you after that? How could anyone?”
“It wasn’t you I needed to trust me,” whispered O’Shea.
“McGonagall?”
“McGonagall. And you turned her against me!” O’Shea stated bitterly.
Anthony sighed. McGonagall had been furious when she heard about the food take-over attempt. It had taken little persuasion to get her to confirm Manasa as prefect, and serious convincing to keep McGonagall from expelling O’Shea out-right! But O’Shea would never believe that.
“And the bludgers? Why do that?”
“It was too good an opportunity to miss,” replied O’Shea.
“Too good? What did that mean?” wondered Anthony. Aloud he said, “But those bludgers—they attacked everyone! You attacked our own House!”
“Just you,” came a serene voice. “The rest were only Firsts.”
“Just Firsts?” It hadn’t only been the Firsts, but Anthony didn’t correct her. “But they’re our house too!”
“No. They’re Wycliff guesses,” O’Shea said scornfully. “At most Slytherin wannabes! They were never properly sorted into Slytherin.”
Anthony shook his head in disbelief. No one else had even remotely suggested the Firsts had been incorrectly sorted. “Who helped you?” he asked changing the subject.
“What?”
“Who helped you?” Anthony repeated. It was an important question. “The hole by the greenhouse, for example,” he began. “It’s so deep; you couldn’t have done that all on your own.”
“I had a lot of practice at H2,” she replied.
“But surely someone stood guard while you worked,” persisted Anthony.
“A bit of extra magic snow and no one ever looked my way,” she answered disdainfully.
“But, the rules!” Anthony reminded. “You couldn’t have gone anywhere alone so who else knew and helped?”
“The rules stopped at the dorms,” she told him. “It was easy enough to check in and then slip out under a disillusionment spell when no one was looking.”
“So, maybe you managed the hole by yourself but you couldn’t have put that bludger stunt together alone.”
“But I did!” O’Shea answered proudly. “No one else cared about you once we got back to Hogwarts.”
“But how?” questioned Anthony with interest. “You hadn’t enough time!”
“I had plenty of time!” she told Anthony. “I stole the bludgers the moment Turay pointed the finger at Crowley.”
“You did? Why?”
“Crowley’s connected,” O’Shea told him. “I knew she’d get off and you’d step in to claim the credit! And I’d be there waiting to take you down to where you belong!”
That was cold. “Thanks so much,” said Anthony dryly. “And now I know. You’ve broken the rules and endangered everyone O’Shea,” he told her. “It’s got to stop.”

“You going to tell?” she questioned. “No one will believe you!” she asserted firmly. “They all know you hate me. It’s your word against mine.”

“Not exactly.”

“Lumos!” A wand lit up, but not Anthony’s. The voice and light came from behind him.

“Lumos!” More wands lit up—each held by a different student. Their lit wands illuminated the whole area. Anthony could now see O’Shea’s mud streaked face and the black hole he had pulled her out of. The students made a complete circle around Anthony and O’Shea three rows deep. It was the full student body including Turay. Weasley extendable ears had been placed from the hole to where they stood so they could hear every word said and then they’d cast muffleto spells over themselves to insure O’Shea wouldn’t hear them.

“There’s no proof of any of the things we suspect her of doing,” continued Corner when he had spoken to Anthony earlier. “I read about how Crowley got Clarke to confess in front of witnesses,” Corner added. “I was kind of hoping maybe you could do the same…”

“The question becomes what do we do about it now that we all know…” stated Anthony.

“I—” O’Shea broke off.

“Lied,” filled in Anthony mentally. That’s what he would have said under the same circumstance. But he had a feeling O’Shea was having a difficult time saying that particular word at the moment.

“I’ll lie!” O’Shea promised instead. “I’ll say I said whatever it took to get out of that hole!”

“Veritiserum!” replied Anthony promptly while tapping the flagon of butterbeer in his pocket. “We all know otherwise.” Interesting how Corner had just happened to have some veritiserum in his possession…

“That’s illegal!”

“I’m not the Ministry. So, how much do you wish to stay at Hogwarts?” asked Anthony. “It’s going to cost!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we might be willing to not bring this to McGoangall’s attention for the right price…”

“Seriously?” asked O’Shea in disbelief. “With this many students someone’s bound to tell, if they haven’t already!”

“I can assure you they haven’t,” Anthony said confidently. “And they won’t, if we come to an agreement,” said Anthony. “I repeat, do you want to stay in Hogwarts because if I tell McGoangall, you’ll be expelled for sure!”

“What kind of arrangement?”

“Well, for start, five galleons per student for all the extra anxiety you put them through making them think there was a kidnapper within our midst at H2 when there wasn’t.”

“Five galleons!” exploded O’Shea. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Ten!” replied Anthony promptly.

“What?!!?”

“Fifteen!”

“I’d advise you quit protesting while it’s only fifteen!” drawled the sardonic voice of Fitzpatrick. “Not that I mind the extra spending money…” Even though he wasn’t looking, Anthony knew Fitzpatrick had that snarky grin planted on his face.

O’Shea gulped.

“An additional five galleons per Slytherin because of the bludger attack,” Anthony continued as if O’Shea had actually agreed.

“What? That’s ridiculous!” exclaimed O’Shea.
“No it isn’t,” argued Anthony. “And now it’s ten! Some of us are still having nightmares about it.” Himself included. “Three galleons more to the students who received physical injuries and five galleons per broken bone,” Anthony added. He’d suffered four broken ribs, a broken arm (three places,) a shattered shoulder, and a fractured skull.

“Five!” objected O’Shea. “But everyone recovered within an hour!”

It had taken much longer than that but the speed of repair wasn’t the point. “It shouldn’t have happened in the first place,” scolded Anthony. “And now it’s ten! Triple for Malfoy,” Anthony added relentlessly. “It took several days to regrow his bones,” he reminded. “Fifty galleons to Basu for that attack in the greenhouse,” Anthony continued before O’Shea had time to protest.

“I’m not paying Basu anything!” O’Shea declared.

“You will if you wish to remain at Hogwarts,” promised Anthony grimly. “And now it’s sixty! You endangered all of us with that stunt. Ten galleons for the wand replacements and another fifty to compensate Basu for her inconvenience and humiliation of being wandless at H2.”

“Tell McGonagall!” hissed O’Shea angrily. “I’m out of here!” She stood. And stopped, no doubt seeing all the wands immediately pointed at her. The first row of students had lit their wands leaving the second and third rows free to aim theirs, which they now did.

“Father will be happy to start a class action lawsuit against you on behalf of the rest of us and the parents you terrorized this year,” spoke up Pilkington while stepping forward and inside the circle. “I expect he’ll get a judgement of fifty galleons per family easy, plus legal expenses…”

“And we’ll be launching a second class action lawsuit on behalf of the Slytherins you terrorized with those invisible bludgers,” put in Scorpius while stepping forward as well.

“Hope you like being in the news!” continued Rose Weasley while stepping into the circle. “Ms. Skeeter will have a field day!”

“She’ll be dragging your name through the mud like she did Crowley’s,” added Scorpius, “only there will no headline proclaiming your innocence because you’re not! It’ll take decades for your family to recover from the humiliation if ever.”

“Of course we’ll actually be suing your parents as you are not yet legally an adult,” informed Pilkington. “That way so we won’t have to wait until you get out of Azkaban to collect.”

“Azkaban?!”

“That’s attempted murder!” reminded Anthony coldly. “Basu, Febland and me! Did you think we would let you walk away from that without consequence?”

“No one died!”

“That’s where the word “attempted” comes in,” he informed her. “Wizards have been thrown into Azkaban for much less. You’ll be old and gray by the time you get out!” Anthony straightened. “Three hundred galleons for each attempt plus another ten each for wand replacement!” he told her.

“That’s twelve hundred total!” called out a new voice. Corner stepped forward. Both Anthony and O’Shea looked at him in surprise. This was Anthony’s show! Why was Corner interrupting? “Spiders!” Corner said firmly. “Spider venom is rather toxic,” he added. “You may have thought you could lead a rescue team to the spider cave, but you would have only been rescuing corpses. If I hadn’t been there to chase off the spiders, you’d be facing murder charges!” Corner told O’Shea.

“There to chase off the spiders? No he didn’t! How dare he!” thought Anthony with sudden fury.

“And another hundred for wand theft!” Corner continued. “The two I found in your possession when I removed you from the Centaur camp. Fifty galleons each,” he added. “That’s the Ministry fine for wand theft, if the actual owner is found alive,” he told her. “And Azkaban if they’re not. You got a deal when Richards only charged you replacement cost for the broken wands,” Corner declared.

Anthony’s anger vanished. Corner had publicly explained the return of the wands and his lie kept their second wands secret. Anthony looked at O’Shea. “Well?” he asked her. “What’ll it be? Do you settle with us? Or shall I call McGonagall?”

“And if he calls McGonagall, plan on staying put until the Ministry can get here, too,” added
Fitzpatrick stepping forward and aiming his wand firmly at O’Shea. “In the hole!” he threatened.

“It’s a good deal,” advised Pilkington. “Dad would never settle on an attempted murder charges alone for less than a thousand galleons. That’s 6 for 1,200…”

“Oh, all right!” said O’Shea in an impatient voice. “Let’s get out of here!” she pushed Fitzpatrick’s wand aside and took a step forward.

“Wait a minute!” Anthony ordered. O’Shea sighed and paused. “Everything?”

“Course!” she said with an airy toss of her head.

“Let’s make sure we’re agreeing to the same thing.” Anthony could envision O’Shea maintain she had agreed only to pay one portion not the bill in total. “How much does it all add up to?” he called out.

Immediately the line of lit wands parted; Albus Potter stepped forward. He held a quill in one hand and a rolled parchment in the other. “Have a look,” Potter said while handing O’Shea the scroll. “It’s all itemized,” Potter added proudly while she unrolled the scroll. "And Hugo double-checked the math."

O’Shea’s eyes widened when she saw the number written on the bottom of the scroll. She should. Compensation for “student anxiety” alone ran over 3,000 galleons. “I don’t have that kind of money,” said O’Shea flatly.

“Not here,” agreed Anthony. No one carried that many galleons at school. But Anthony knew the O’Sheas were “old” magic who boasted of vaults filled with galleons; he was certain the family could afford to pay for everything without difficulty. “I’ll give you a week to get it,” he told her. “One week until midnight. After that I tell McGonagall everything.” Anthony moved closer. “Think about it,” Anthony whispered in his most persuasive tone. “No prison time, no legal fees, no criminal record to follow you out of school, no humiliating publicity… The amount may look large, but it’s miniscule compared to the lifetime of agony it replaces… One week,” he reminded. “The choice is yours.” Then Anthony turned and walked away. He headed back to the castle. The other students followed leaving O’Shea alone in the darkness.

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One minute passed. Two minutes, ten...

“Lumos!” Jeremy Corner’s wand lit and he held it high. O’Shea’s mud-stained face had a sort of stunned/shocked expression on it. She hadn’t moved a centimeter from where Richards had left her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked in a desolate voice.

“I thought you might like to see,” Jeremy answered neutrally. “Wouldn’t want you to fall in that hole…”

“Like you’d care!”

“Um, I do, actually,” he answered. “You might get hurt…” O’Shea was standing rather close to the edge. She looked on the brink, on the edge—both mentally and physically. That didn’t bode well for O’Shea. It wouldn’t do to loose O’Shea if there were a way to keep that from happening… Jeremy took a step away from the area of the hole. He stopped and looked at O’Shea. “You coming?” he invited.

“Why?”

“Why not?” he asked reasonably.

“Where?”

“The castle.”

“No.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, the greenhouses are locked and I wouldn’t recommend the woods right now,” Jeremy began in a thoughtful voice. “The spiders and Centaurs, they kind of hate you…”

“Like the students don’t?”

“True,” agreed Jeremy, “but at least they aren’t inclined to kill you!” Earlier, when the prefects, Advisors and Richards had gathered to decide what to do about O’Shea, maybe. But their tempers had cooled considerably since then.

With his free hand Jeremy pulled out a corned beef sandwich from the extendable pocket in his vest—part of his “just because” stash. “Here,” he said offering the sandwich to O’Shea. “Nothing sneaky in it either,” he added. “I swear.”

O’Shea slowly unwrapped the sandwich and took a small bite. That was good. Solid food always helped. O’Shea hadn’t eaten anything for lunch or dinner; no wonder that veritserium in the butterbeer had taken effect so quickly. She took another bite, and another.

“Come on,” Jeremy encouraged again while taking a step. “I know some places in the castle where you can hide out,” he offered. To his relief, O’Shea followed.

“What places?” she asked after taking another bite of his sandwich.

“Places that don’t need a wand to get into,” Jeremy answered vaguely. “Even know a way you can get into Hogwarts without anyone seeing you, if you want…” he offered. Holly had used it a lot. “Though, personally, I wouldn’t bother…”

“You wouldn’t? Why?”

“You’ve no reason to hide,” Jeremy answered. “Everyone already knows what you did; they aren’t going to bother you any.”

“They won’t?”

“Nah, the Slytherins want you to pay, literally, so they won’t do anything that could change your mind. And the Gryffindors are hoping you’ll bail, but they’re too honorable to try to push you into it.”

“And the Hufflepuffs?”

“They want justice; Azkaban punishes, but does not provide reparations. Is that just?”

“What about you?”

Chapter 49
“Me? Oh, you mean the Ravenclaws.”
O’Shea nodded.
“We like a challenge,” Jeremy replied without answering. “I don’t think you should hand any money over until you have some guarantees, though,” Jeremy told O’Shea as if her accepting Richards’ proposal was a forgone conclusion.
“Oh?”
“Yes, Richards promised you would not get expelled,” Jeremy explained. “What if you get expelled anyway? I should think you would deserve a refund…”
“But Richards said—”
“Richards promised he wouldn’t tell McGonagall and I have no doubt he’ll keep his word. But do you think Richards is McGonagall’s only source? McGonagall is not bound by Richard’s promise; I’d demand some stronger assurances that you’ll not get expelled if I were you…”
“Oh.”
“He also promised no lawsuits,” continued Jeremy. “Can he do that? What if some disgruntled parent wants more than what you’ve already paid? Are you protected?”
“And no publicity or Azkaban!” reminded O’Shea.
“That’s right!” agreed Jeremy with relief. O’Shea had thought of those two herself. That was good. It seemed counterproductive to tear down all of Richards’ efforts but Jeremy wanted to get O’Shea to think beyond the money and to the future afterwards, if she agreed. “You should ask Potter and Pilkington for ways to make this agreement more secure,” Jeremy suggested.
“Seriously?” scoffed O’Shea. “They’re flunkies for Richards!” How little did she know...
O’Shea’s destructive hatred had isolated her from the other students and limited her perspectives.
“Potter cut a pretty sharp deal with the Borage Publications for that potions book a while back,” stated Jeremy informatively, “and Pilkington’s father is, well, you know. The important point is they both want this to happen. If you won’t do your part without some specific assurances, then they’ll do whatever they can to resolve things to everyone’s satisfaction. Which reminds me, make sure you double-check the math before you pay anything, though,” Jeremy advised. “Weasley’s good but he had to do a lot of last minute changes when Richards kept upping the numbers… And you should cross check the bone number itemization with Madam Pomfrey’s records…”
“Why?”
“Well, Richards said ten galleons per broken bone.”
“So?”
“If I recall correctly, Richards’s arm was broken in three places during the bludger attack. That’s three breaks. Were you charged ten, or thirty galleons for that arm? The difference is really important especially when it comes to something like a shattered vertebrae…” The bill O’Shea had seen was calculated by bone pieces and not bone—at Jeremy’s insistence. It gave O’Shea wiggle room, something to negotiate and lower, something she could salvage from the situation. The final bill would still be high, but not as high as it could have been... "I have your wand,” Jeremy added changing the subject. “T’isn’t theft, you understand. I’ll give it to McGonagall to give to you if you wish… But she’ll want a full explanation of how I came to get it in the first place. That would include what you said in the camp—every word.” Corner paused giving O’Shea time to reflect and remember what had happened during her time with the Centaurs. It hadn’t been pretty. O’Shea had been crying and screaming and begging and bawling like a baby. “I’ll keep McGonagall out of it and be quiet about what you did, even return your wand to you,” Corner continued pausing again before adding, “for a price.”
When he didn’t explain further, O’Shea rolled her eyes and said, “O.K., I’ll bite, how much?”
“I don’t want your money,” he told her. “I want an apology.”
“What?” she asked with surprise.
“An apology,” answered Corner.
“That’s stupid.”
Jeremy nodded. O’Shea would think that. “Perhaps,” Jeremy agreed neutrally, “but that’s what I want. Two, very public apologies delivered at one of our meals before school ends. One
apology to the whole student body for all the problems you caused this year adding to our other worries, and another to all the firsts—it doesn’t matter how Wycliff did it, the firsts have all been properly sorted, and to suggest otherwise calls to question the membership of every house.” They reached the pathway, stepped onto it and turned heading in the direction of the castle. “Your apologies need to be honest, sincere and convincing,” Jeremy added as they walked. “You do that and I’ll return your wand. You don’t, and I’ll not only hand your wand over to McGonagall but tell Skeeter all about how I got it when I get off the Express in London!” O’Shea had done worse and attempted more damage with the spiders, but at least she had managed to weasel her way out in a respectable Slytherin fashion; she had failed with the Centaurs. They’d had no patience for humans and wanted nothing to do with her. Explicit details of that failure could prove more embarrassing and humiliating to O’Shea than all the rest.

They continued walking towards the castle in silence; Jeremy holding the lit wand and O’Shea close, but not quite, by his side. “It’s pretty clear you don’t regret anything now,” Jeremy said in a conversational tone, “but maybe you will after you think about it. At any rate, the veritserium will have worn off so I expect you to look and sound convincing when you apologize.”

Jeremy let her think about that as they neared the castle door. Then he added, “Perhaps you should consult Richards for tips on how to give apologies,”

O’Shea froze in place. Jeremy stopped with her. No doubt going to Richards for anything was the last thing on O’Shea’s mind. It shouldn’t be; he was a rising Slytherin, and as such, his patronage should be cultivated. “Now why would I do that?” O’Shea asked in a cutting tone that sounded near her usual voice.

“I understand McGonagall was so impressed with the apology he gave for his activities last year, she made him her Assistant…”

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Corner and O’Shea walked up the steps. The huge doors of the castle swung open with a loud creak. The two walked inside. The doors closed behind them with a thunderous clang.

The small silver tabby crouched at the foot of the steps outside the castle straightened and stood. She then morphed into Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. Richards had not needed to tell Minerva about O’Shea. Corner had! Or, rather, Corner had gone to Luna as soon as he had deposited O’Shea in the hole. Luna had called a meeting of the auror students and together they had decided their next move. While Corner was greeting Richards and Basu on the lawn, Luna had told Minerva what they were doing, not to gain approval, just to “keep her informed.” There was no way Minerva was letting a meeting of that nature occur without being present…

“Lumos,” came a voice from overhead. Professor Lovegood’s wand lit up chasing away the darkness and shadows. She landed lightly on the path before the steps taking hold of her broom in the process. O’Shea complained that the Centaurs were always “looking up.” In contrast, witches and wizards rarely did. It was a simple matter for Luna to fly overhead and observe.

“The students have united,” Luna announced. “I pity the witch or wizard foolish enough to take them on.”

Minerva nodded. The extent of their unification, begun as a defense against the effects of Pettigrew’s hand and continued at H2, was impressive. “Do you think O’Shea will take the deal?” Minerva asked Luna.

“She would be wise to do so,” replied Luna in her musical voice.

“But will she?” persisted Minerva.

“That is the responsibility of the auror students,” she replied in a serene voice. “It will not go well for her or us if she chooses expulsion.”

Minerva nodded. That was one reason why the auror students were involved. The price was steep, but expulsion would have far reaching consequences. Better a “save” now than a messy arrest later… She turned and started down the path. Luna followed.

“If she leaves Hogwarts,” Luna continued, “from whom will she—”
“…turn to for her education?” filled in Minerva. “Yes, her choices are limited, and all dark in nature.” She paused. That line was familiar. “Have you been talking to Potter?”

Luna blinked. “Not recently,” she answered. “Should I?”

“I guess not,” Minerva replied.

“Where are we going?”

“To fill in that hole!” Minerva answered grimly. That hole was an abomination that should have never been created and should have been filled in ages ago! Why hadn’t it? Corner certainly should have never put O’Shea in there! Then again, O’Shea should have never dug it in the first place or lured Basu and Febland there! Perhaps it was only fair O’Shea experience time in the hole too. But no more!

They reached the hole and peered into its inky depths. How did one fill something this deep? What had O’Shea done with the original dirt? “Any ideas?” Minerva asked Luna.

“Yes.” Luna reached up, removed her acorn earrings and held them out to Minerva.

“Acorns?”

“The mightiest of oaks grow from them,” Luna reminded. “We’d need some fertilizer though.”

Minerva nodded. “I believe there’s some in there,” she said indicating the nearby greenhouse.

The two of them made their way to the greenhouse. A few minutes later they returned with a watering can full of water and a small pot filled with a mixture of potting soil and fertilizer. Luna carefully buried her two acorns in the prepared soil and set the pot next to the edge of the hole.

“Ready?” she asked after picking up the watering can.

Minerva drew her wand. “Yes,” she answered. “Wingardium Leviosal!” she shouted aiming her wand at the pot. It floated gently up off the ground. Minerva directed the pot to float over the center of the hole.

“Be sure to keep the pot level with the top surface,” Luna instructed.

Minerva nodded.

While holding her lit wand in one hand, Luna lifted the watering can and began to water the pot.

Almost immediately the acorns sprouted. Leaves furled and unfurled; the slender stems grew upwards. Slender roots appeared out of holes in the bottom of the pot. More and more roots appeared. Abruptly the pot broke with a loud “pop” unable to contain the mass of roots within; the shards fell into the hole. Luna kept watering the seedlings; Minerva focused her magic on the oaks keeping the base of the stem at ground level. Finding no resistance, the roots shot down and out. Some of the roots touched the sides of the hole and burrowed deep into the soil. Other roots continued downward eventually reaching the bottom of the hole. Minerva released her hold when she was certain the roots would support the trees and keep them upright. Luna continued to water while the trunks reached overhead with fat branches filled with leaves and the roots below thickened in a tangled mass filling the space until there was no hole. It would take longer for dirt to seep in and fill the empty spaces, but no one would “fall in” again.

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“What do you plan to say to the parents?” asked Luna while they were cleaning up.

“The parents?”

“Yes, the O’Sheas. They’re bound to be very unhappy; this doesn’t work if they don’t pay…”

“True,” Minerva stopped what she was doing and thought. “I suppose I’ll have to agree with them,” she began. “Richards had no authority to negotiate anything on my behalf or for Hogwarts. Any deal he made should be considered null and void. Then I’ll ask them to wait while I complete the paperwork to expel their daughter…”

“Not wanting an expulsion and all the negative things which go with that…”

“Like arrest and Azkaban…”

“…They’ll argue that, by virtue of his title, Richards was indeed authorized to make the deal and you should be held to it whether you want to or not!” reasoned Luna aloud.
Minerva nodded. “They’ll eventually “win” their argument and do their part to keep the agreement and pay…”

“It should work,” said Luna approvingly. “And the governors?”

“Malfoy’s grandson was in on the negotiations as was Wycliff. And Potter’s boy kept track of the money. They’ll support their children; I doubt the others will complain much,” Minerva declared.

“What about the other parents?”

“I’m not sure,” she mused. “I guess it depends upon the parents… Perhaps the student unity will extend to them as well.”

“It should,” agreed Luna.
Chapter 50

The Sidewinder Express, a sleek emerald green limousine, pulled up to the curb. Chauffeur Rupert Shunpike hopped out of the vehicle, walked around to the other side and opened the door. Mrs. Paige Brenna Crowley gracefully stepped out. “Will there be anything else, Mum?” he asked politely as he closed the door.

“No,” Paige answered imperiously as she wrapped her lime green robe around her shoulders against the light chill in the air. “You may go now,” she added dismissing him. She paid well for Shunpike’s services, there was no need for artificial politeness.

“Yes, mum,” answered Shunpike. He re-entered the limo and the Express took off without a sound.

Paige looked around. She had never before been at the Hampstead Heath; it was Muggle territory filled with Muggles. There was almost an unwritten rule about Muggles and Wizards not mixing, but it couldn’t be helped today. Paige selected the desired path and began walking. Aside from noting their presence, Paige ignored the Muggles she saw. They were beneath her notice. Paige neither needed nor desired the recognition or acclaim of Muggles.

Finally she saw a picnic table set a bit off the pathway. A small green vase had been placed on the table. The vase was filled with shiny red oak leaves, poison oak. Paige stepped up to the table and regarded it with disgust. The bench looked ancient and filthy. The tabletop looked no better. Only the vase and oak leaves looked new and clean. Paige drew her wand. Keeping it out of sight, she whispered a quick cleaning spell she had learned from her days at the Hog’s Head. Then she sat down with wand in hand (under the table) and her back to the woods so she could keep an eye on the path.

Paige watched the nearby Muggles warily. They were harmless enough, but unpredictable. Lots of Muggles passed by. Old, young, fast, slow… None of them gave Paige a second glance. Paige waited. After about an hour, an old lady shuffled into view. She wore several layers of clearly unwashed clothes; her tangled hair hung in greasy straggles, and she carried a basket plainly marked with the message: “Homeless; anything helps!” Unlike the other Muggles, she glanced at Paige and then veered in Paige’s direction with a calculating gleam in her eye. Paige steeled herself for a confrontation while mentally deciding on which aversion spell to use to get rid of her.

“Got any spare change, luv?” the lady asked in a hopeful voice smiling wide showing a toothless mouth.

“No!” answered Paige icily.

But instead of leaving, the lady moved up closer. She set the basket on the end of the table and sat down across from Paige. Paige aimed her wand... Then the lady leaned over the table towards Paige. She was so close Paige could smell the distinctive sent of body odor and other things too nasty to describe. “Not even for your dear aunt?” she whispered and her toothless lips curved up smiling wide.

Paige’s mouth stayed closed with difficulty. “Auntie D.?” she whispered staring closer at the lady. Before Paige’s eyes, the old lady’s toothless mouth filled in with familiar pointy teeth and the features, though thinner, became again recognizable.

“You wanted to see me?” Aunt Delores Umbrige said again sitting back, her expression serious.

Paige gulped. She had, sort of. Almost two weeks ago, Paige had asked DeWitt to go to Larry the Locksmith, to make arrangements for her to meet with the person who paid to reset the broach. That morning, Paige had found a folded scrap of parchment on the counter that contained a drawing of a Celtic knot, a place, map and a time—but no explanation. She had decided to investigate…

Paige drew in a breath. “Eighteen owners claimed their establishments have been vandalized and have identified me as the vandal!!”

“So?”
“I did not do it!”
“Tell that to the Ministry, not me,” replied Auntie D. blandly.
“It occurs to me that you might have acquired some of my hairs a few years ago and done the vandalizing with a bit of polyjuice,” continued Paige ignoring her suggestion.
“Why would I do that?” asked Auntie D. with this sort of predatory smile on her face.
“I don’t know,” answered Paige with frustration. “But I want to clear my name!”
“Then clear it!” she told Paige. “No doubt you’ve an alibi of some sort to support your claim of innocence or Thomas would have arrested you already.”
“Why would you deliberately set me up like that?” persisted Paige. “Do you hate me that much?”
“Of course not, dear!” reassured Auntie D. in an affectionate sounding voice. “But frankly, it’s not as if there was anyone else recently escaped from Ministry custody I could use…”
“Use?” Paige could feel her hackles rise at the suggestion she was “used.”
Auntie D leaned back. “There is a law making the Ministry financially responsible for any damage caused by someone who has escaped their custody,” she told Paige. “It’s a very good law. I wrote it myself! And quite profitable!”
“Profitable?”
“Very!” Auntie D. purred. “Back in the days of the Dark Lord, when someone was arrested and the family really wanted him back, an arrangement could always be worked out.”
“But the vandalizing?”
“If someone had a business about to fail or go under and needed a bit of assistance, why shouldn’t the Ministry help out?” she asked innocently. “Putting the two together was quite easy, really.”
“For a price?”
“Of course! Ten percent—I’m very reasonable. Everyone won!”
“You set me up!” Paige exploded angrily.
“I did not!” denied Auntie D.
“You got me arrested!”
“I did nothing of the sort!” assured Auntie D. “You give me too much credit!”
“Do I?” persisted Paige. “You gave me the broach,” she reminded. “You must have known in advance I’d need it, known I’d get arrested!”
“Arrested? Of course not, but a good key is always useful to have, especially in your line of work… Did you use it in the Ministry?” Auntie D. questioned suddenly. Paige didn’t answer. “And it worked?” she continued taking Paige’s silence for assent. “My, my,” Auntie D. mused while leaning back again. “I must have one made for me!”
As she spoke, Paige remembered the circumstances under which she had used the key… “Did you cast that Imperius Curse?” she asked suddenly certain Auntie D. had something to do with it…
“There was a curse cast?” asked Auntie D. with interest. “And you resisted it? Very good! I knew you could…” she stated proudly. “I bet you threw that old witch for a loop when you did!” she added with obvious satisfaction.
“Did you know about her too!” exclaimed Paige suddenly. “Did you help?”
“I would never help her!” answered Auntie D. in a hard cold voice. “Margaret Moore was my best friend at Hogwarts,” she added. “I knew something was off with her when I attended the funeral for her mum! It took longer to figure out what but there was no way to undo it, no way prove it! And when I heard Reaghan died, I knew what that, that thing, had tried. And I knew she had failed!” she added with satisfaction. “I also knew what would happen to the child when she woke…”
“And you said nothing?”
“To whom? I’m not even supposed to be out of Azkaban let alone know of such things! The Ministry likes proof before taking action. In the meantime, that thing went to me for help waking the child! She told me she just wanted her dear granddaughter back, but I knew better. Then she tried to blackmail me into helping. Me! How dare she! So I set… her… up! I told her you were rather gifted with potions but weak minded, which was why I was able to keep you under a curse for so
long. I let her think I had pulled the strings to keep you out of Azkaban all this time… Her arrogance in thinking I would ever betray my own to her was her undoing! Did she suffer?” Auntie D. asked hopefully. “I hope it was agonizing!”

“But you did betray me!” Paige declared. “You attacked all those places while looking like me! You set me up!”

“Nonsense!” Auntie D. retorted. “There is no “set-up” when I knew my actions would not cause you to suffer any consequences. You’re too careful for that. You would have taken the time to create an impeccable alibi like the one that has kept you out of Azkaban all this time! Where did you go? Pilkington or Potter?” Paige’s mouth dropped in surprise. “Probably Potter,” continued Auntie D. “Pilkington would have been legally bound to turn you in and he’s a stickler for the rules but Potter, he answers to no laws! He’s been an undisciplined ruffian from day one!”

Paige managed to close her mouth. “You, you know about Potter?” she sputtered.

“My dear, of course I do! Who else would Thomas turn to to stash a witness against Sir? Potter protects his own, and in protecting you he protected Wycliff. Whatever happened to Sir anyway? He didn’t die in Azkaban but I haven’t found him under any aliases!”

“You know I’m an auror!” Paige exclaimed in disbelief.

“You really think I didn’t know what classes you were taking that year, all the classes? I made sure you attended!” Auntie D. reminded. “Continued to receive your usual high marks. When Thomas didn’t arrest you after the explosion I knew you must have already taken your vows. It’s the only reason he would have let you walk free despite the evidence Sir provided. Did Pilkington arrange that? He’s very clever and one to watch! And as for the vandalism, Thomas would have already arrested you by now if you hadn’t an ironclad alibi, one he does not wish to publicize. I suggest you tell Thomas to advise the Ministry to pay off their claims before Rita starts asking questions why the Ministry hasn’t charged you with those crimes! Either he gets them to authorize payment or accusation of corruption within the Ministry will be the least of his problems!” Auntie D. threatened. “I’m sure there’s enough money under “Miscellaneous” to cover it,” she added. “It’s why I started that fund…”

“You used me!” exploded Paige! “You sent Regina against me knowing what she was—without even a warning!”

“You didn’t need one!” retorted Auntie D. scornfully. “I knew she was no match for you! And I didn’t set her against you. She did that herself. She believed all that negative publicity. She thought you were an easy mark, someone to pin her problems on and I didn’t tell her otherwise!”

“I don’t like being used,” stated Paige angrily.

“That’s too bad,” replied Auntie D. unsympathetically. “What is the point of having an auror in the family if you can’t use her when you need one? Besides, I have to do something to get rid of all those slimy creatures who try to blackmail me into doing their will…” Auntie D. leaned forward. “Of course, they would have no reason to blackmail me if I were out…” she suggested.

“What?”

“Out!” she repeated. “Legally out; for time served, good behavior, whatever. I’ll even keep the Ministry secret that I’ve been out longer than they’ve let on,” Auntie D. promised, “as long as I can walk the streets of Diagon Alley again without having to wear some disgusting costume…” She stood picking up the “homeless” basket as she did. “Think about it,” she told Paige. Then Auntie D. reached out a filthy hand, took hold of the vase and vanished leaving behind a mound of poison oak leaves on the table.

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EARLY RELEASE

“The Ministry of Magic has announced it has decided to grant the request for Clemency made by Paige Brenna Crowley on behalf of her Aunt Delores Umbridge. Mrs. Crowley pleaded her aunt has suffered enough and wants her back home with family. Seeing as Mrs. Crowley made the original accusations, her request was given special attention. In accordance with that decision,
the Ministry released Delores Umbridge from Azkaban Prison early this morning. When interviewed, Mrs. Umbridge stated it was “good to be out “and that she “held no ill will towards her niece for lying in the first place.”

Daily Prophet

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“Are you ready, Potter?” called out Headmistress McGonagall.

“Just about,” replied Harry Potter. He straightened his robe and gave his unruly hair one last attempt with a comb. Today was an important day for the people at Hogwarts. It was a day commemorated throughout the wizard world. It was a day Harry did not particularly wish to remember.

The door opened and Prime Minister Shacklebolt stepped in. He was attired in his finest dress robes, as was fitting of his position. Harry wore plain black dress robes; he refused to wear anything fancier. “Hello, Harry,” said Shacklebolt warmly shaking Harry’s hand.

“Hello, Kingsley,” greeted Harry in return.

Kingsley looked through the window. “It’s almost time,” he commented. Harry looked outside and nodded. It did look a bit lighter. The ceremony was timed to coincide with dawn. Always dawn. McGonagall insisted Harry arrive the night before knowing full well that he would arrive late or not at all given the opportunity. Unfortunately, there were some things even Harry could not avoid.

“Are you ready?” asked McGonagall entering the room. She was wearing full dress robes also. Her tartan plaids sparkled as the threads of silver woven within caught the light. “It’s time.” Kingsley and Harry nodded. “Come along then,” she said sweeping out of the room. Harry and Kingsley followed.

The three walked down to the Great Hall stopping at the entrance. The other Hogwarts professors were waiting outside the entrance. Standing next to Professor Slughorn was Lucius Malfoy! “About time, Potter,” he said imperiously. “Do you always cut things so close?”

Harry bristled at the taunt. “What are you doing here?” questioned Harry bluntly.

“I’m here for the Ceremony, of course!” Malfoy replied grandly. “Thought I’d see if you could do better than last year…” he added suggestively alluding to the tainted wands and the fact no one bothered to actually visit the Memorial room.

Harry knew it was Malfoy’s right to attend the ceremony if he wished. But he’d never taken advantage of that right until last year. There were no tainted wands this year; Harry hadn’t expected Malfoy to return.

“Shall we get this over with?” Malfoy stated with an infuriating smile on his lips.

“Yeah!” agreed Harry…

“Then let’s get on with it,” said McGonagall primly. She led the way into the Great Hall followed by Prime Minister Shacklebolt and then Harry Potter.

Malfoy slipped in line behind Kingsley and in front of Harry. “We’re both Governors, Potter, ‘M’ before ‘P,’’ he reminded Harry imperiously as he did it.

“Yeah, right,” grumbled Harry and paused his step so he wouldn’t be too close to Malfoy. Malfoy had done that last year too. There was no point in objecting.

The Great Hall was full of people. Harry kept his face carefully neutral and his eyes fixed straight ahead as he walked down the center with the rest of the procession. “I should be used to this by now,” he told himself. But he wasn’t. Crowds of people pointing and looking as he passed by still made him uncomfortable. As Harry walked, he wondered why Malfoy had come again. It couldn’t be to actually attend the Ceremony was it? What other reason could there be?

Finally, they reached the end of the hall, climbed up the steps and walked to the seating area reserved for dignitaries. McGonagall sat in the center chair near the podium. Kingsley sat to her left. Malfoy confidently moved up and sat proudly next to Kingsley. Harry found himself stuck next to Malfoy, again. Harry groaned mentally and sat down.
Once seated, Harry used the opportunity to look out at the crowd below him. As usual, the seating was arranged by year. First year students sat in benches making the front row, the Seconds came next and so on, with all other guests seated in the back. Though he was certain the students still managed to sit by House; gone was the familiar wide stripes of House colours from front to back instead of by table. This year, there was more royal blue than not in the student clothing colours.

Harry quickly counted up four rows, looked where the Gryffindor usually sat and found Lily seated between friends. He spotted Hugo in the row in front of Lily. Behind Lily in the sixth row sat Albus, Rose and Conner. Ginny, Ron and Hermione had all found seats right behind him. That was nice. Harry wished, as usual, he was sitting out there with them. Harry spotted Holly seated on the far right end of the hall next to Becky in the same row. Her head was held high and seemed to be watching the proceedings with interest.

Headmistress McGonagall stood to speak. The whole hall grew quiet. “Friends, students, Professors, and honored guests,” began McGonagall. “We are gathered here today to remember…” As usual, Harry tried hard to not listen. He didn’t want to remember; it was too painful.

“Doesn’t she ever change her speech?” whispered Malfoy in Harry’s ear. “I should think you’re all bored with it by now!”

Harry bit back a response. Of course the speech was the same! The day they were remembering hadn’t changed. McGonagall sat down. Kingsley stood. He began to speak. “At least the students are better behaved,” murmured Malfoy in Harry’s ear. “Obviously Richards has done a good job whipping them in shape!”

Harry felt himself bristle at the implied cut; there was nothing wrong with the students and nothing Richards had done to change their behavior. “More likely they don’t have to worry about tainted wands this year,” Harry managed to whisper back. That should silence him!

Kingsley didn’t like to make speeches. His was short, timed to end with the sunrise. When he finished, the edge of dazzling sun appeared over the sill of the nearest window. Everybody turned to look at it, imagining what it had been like to be here that final moment… Harry didn’t look. He didn’t have to imagine; he already knew! He filled his mind with thoughts of family and those he loved instead.

After a full minute of dazzling sunlight, everyone filed silently out of the Great Hall to go upstairs.

“Congratulations,” said Malfoy dryly in Harry’s ear as they walked. “You made it through the ceremony. I suppose we have to see the room now.”

“Feel free to remain behind,” suggested Harry.

“I think not,” said Malfoy as Ginny joined Harry. “Mrs. Potter!” he said grandly. “Lovely as always! May I join you?”

Ginny’s jaw dropped; she stared at Malfoy with surprise. Malfoy had never before said so much as two words to Ginny. “Uh,” she began uncertainly while looking from Malfoy to Harry and back to Malfoy again.

“Thank you!” said Malfoy without waiting for Ginny to answer. He took Ginny’s free arm and determinedly headed out the hall sweeping her with him. Harry hurried to keep up. Heromine and Ron joined Harry and kept pace.

By the time they reached the painting, most of the people had already entered the room. Luna’s eyebrow raised at the sight of Malfoy and Ginny; she watched wordlessly as they entered and then followed closing the painting door behind her.

It took a few minutes for Harry’s eyes to adjust to the darkness. The semicircle room had expanded to the size of a large outdoors field. It was completely filled with people and still had lots of room to spare. The purples, blues and black all blended together to make a perfect night. The names had spread out like twinkling pinpricks of light creating the feel of a clear starry night.

“What do we do now?” asked Malfoy in a rather loud voice breaking the silence and solemnity of the moment.

“We wait,” whispered Ginny.

“Oh,” and then he added, “for what?”
“Quietly,” she hissed. Malfoy fell silent. He didn’t have to wait long. One of the firsts marched boldly to the wall and touched a name. Immediately a shaft of gold light shot out of the name and coalesced into the figure of an older man with long silver hair that circled slowly above the head of the First. “See?” said the first rather loudly to no one in particular. “I told you! It’s just like at H2! C’ome on!” he added, “I’m hungry!” and headed out the room having clearly lost interest. The rest of the students followed leaving only the adults behind.

“I do believe the students have the right idea,” said Malfoy. “This room’s too gloomy and dark for me,” he continued disapprovingly. “If you’ll excuse me,” he said to Ginny releasing her arm and giving her a courtly bow. Malfoy turned and swept out of the room. “Mum? Dad? We’re waiting!” came Hugo’s voice from the doorway. “Uh, see you outside,” said Ron in a reluctant voice. He and Hermione headed towards the door.

Harry watched them leave and sighed. “Well, I suppose the room does loose some of its impact when it gets used as an infirmary.” Perhaps it was time to look towards the future instead of the past. “I can visit Cedric later…” he told Ginny. “Shall we?” She nodded. Harry held out his arm. Ginny put hers in his and the two walked out of the room.

Anthony Richards, resplendent in his purple Assistant robes, proudly mounted the stadium steps. The Memorial Ceremony had been mercifully short. It definitely helped that the Firsts had all been in there before. Anthony resolved to take all next years’ Firsts into the Memorial room earlier so they wouldn’t take as long during the Ceremony either. The morning “brunch” had become more of a breakfast and gone quickly as well.

The stadium was filled to capacity and then some. Only the people who had participated in the Last Battle were permitted to attend the Memorial along with the students, but today was special and the school had been opened to all after the ceremony had ended. Many of the Wizard families had taken advantage of the opportunity.

Looking around, Anthony saw Scorpius sitting proudly with his grandfather Governor Malfoy. Then he spotted McGonagall seated in the midst of the visiting dignitaries. Anthony headed towards her! It was his place and right to sit next to McGonagall. And why not? He had just scored the largest deal in Hogwarts History, in the history of the whole magical community! Of course, Anthony had “magnanimously” maintained both the Advisors and prefects had assisted, but it was he, Anthony, who had made it happen! Not only that, everyone knew it! There could be no argument; they had all seen and heard him do it!

McGonagall had called Anthony in after that night and raked him over the coals for making unauthorized promises to O’Shea. Anthony pointed out he had only promised to not tell McGoanagall which he hadn’t… But as long as she knew, it would be most helpful if she took no further action against O’Shea, if the O’Sheas paid… And they had! Anthony expected the family to object strenuously to the amount, but they had looked rather smug when they left McGonagall’s office.

The big difficulty was insuring no lawsuits, or publicity. It was finally determined that every Hogwarts student, staff and governor would sign a confidentially contract, protected by a parchment jinx. Anyone who broke the contract would have to reimburse the O’Sheas the full amount plus 40% penalty to cover anticipated legal expenses (or be haunted until the debt was paid!) The only people who did not sign the confidentially contract were the O’Sheas. If anyone one from their family spoke, the contract was broken and everyone else was free to speak as well… So far, no one had spoken.

The O’Sheas waited until the last minute to make their payment. Anthony insisted that he, his advisors and the Potters manage its distribution. It was their deal and their right to follow it through to completion! The group spent the rest of the night counting and dividing the money. The
Anthony looked around as he made his way to his seat. He easily recognized Nadia Turay with her frizzy black hair within the crowd of witches and wizards. She was the only one wearing all black, officially in mourning for her mum, but Anthony knew Turay liked to wear black before her mum had died. Turay had spent the week taking tests. She took the ones the professors had given her class upon their return in January and then every quiz and exam given afterwards. Wycliff was there to insure Turay didn’t “cheat.” Turay’s spare time was spent writing papers, performing spells taught to third years and mixing potions under the watchful eyes of her professors and Wycliff. While not up to usual Ravenclaw standards, Turay’s scores were high enough to enable her to continue on with her classmates.

Anthony spotted Pilkington and his family seated next to Turay. There was the usual insufferable smile on Pilkington’s face, but for once there was good reason for it; the courts had just approved his petition for guardianship of Nadia Turay. It was a sweet deal; she was rich and he could charge his posted private practice rates for exercising his guardianship duties. Word was that Turay would move in with Pilkington and his family once school let out for the summer. Wycliff reported Turay was most satisfied with the arrangement.

At the other end of the stadium sat O’Shea flanked supportively by her parents. Rumour had it the parents were “less than pleased” with what she had done and had promised to put Olivia to work over the summer to earn and return the money they had paid on her behalf.

O’Shea had surprised Anthony by asking for help with making an apology… Of course Anthony agreed, for a price. The resulting apologies, delivered at an evening meal, positively oozed remorse and sincerity. Anthony would have given O’Shea an enthusiastic standing applause except that would have ruined the effect. Afterwards, the students of the other houses no longer openly shunned O’Shea; the Slytherins laid bets as to whether she meant it or not and O’Shea again carried her wand like a proper student…

In the center of the Slytherin section proudly sat Anthony’s parents, his brother Tom and sister-in-law Paige. Anthony had briefly considered sitting with them but they had proudly insisted he sit with the dignitaries. Behind them to one side sat the recently released Dolores Umbridge wearing a pink bow in her hair. She was a thin short lady who smiled too much. Anthony didn’t know what to think of Umbridge. He’d heard stories about the power Umbridge once wielded in the Ministry but she was surely a has-been now. Where were all those Ministry connections when she was sent to Azkaban? Anthony resolved to keep his distance from Umbridge not wanting any association with her to adversely affect his own career.

“Would you like to sit next to me?” invited a musical voice interrupting Anthony’s thoughts. Anthony stopped and looked down at Manasa Basu. She looked particularly attractive in her emerald green long sleeved tunic, matching scarf and dark blue skirt. Anthony looked again at his original destination, McGonagall, seated next to all those—old people! Of course he could sit there, if he wanted; it was his right! But did he want to? Anthony was already in the dignitary section and everyone already knew who he was and his importance. And Manasa was definitely more interesting to sit next to than McGonagall...

“What?” replied Anthony with a smile as he looked at Manasa. Manasa smiled and scooted over on the bench to make more space. Anthony sat down, perhaps closer than he needed, but it was a crowded bench… He was glad he had insisted the prefects and Advisors be permitted to sit with the dignitaries...

“Congratulations!” she said warmly.

“What?”

“I heard you got the reward,” she explained while smiling brightly.

“Oh, Yes.” And Anthony puffed with pride. “It was only fair,” he said modestly. “After all, I did identify Nellie…”

Thackeray’s photos in her album had settled things as far as Rita was concerned, but the Ministry wanted more outside confirmation before releasing the reward. Surprisingly, Umbridge
produced several class photos of her days at Hogwarts which contained positively identified photos of Margaret Moore Thackeray in her youth. Paige had said Auntie D. was happy to “help” her new family by providing the photo, but privately Anthony wondered if the photos were part of a condition Paige required for her to to plead Auntie D.’s early release. Afterwards, several former classmates of Margaret Moore stepped forward and confirmed that the photos were not “doctored,” and that “Nellie” and Margaret Moore were one and the same substantially connecting Thackeray with the kidnappings.

“But there was no arrest or conviction,” Manasa observed reminding Anthony the original conditions of the posted reward. “How did you manage it?”

“True,” Anthony agreed, “but without that identification, we wouldn’t have investigated Thackeray, wouldn’t have learned the truth… And by the time everything was sorted, there was no one alive to convict, either,” he reminded Manasa. “I told the Ministry that a dead Thackeray with the certainty this would never happen again was better than a conviction and they finally agreed,” he told her proudly.

In reality, Anthony settled for only half the reward, which was still a sizable amount given all the desperate families who had contributed to it. Paige insisted Anthony give 10% of that reward to Umbridge in appreciation of her assistance in securing it. “Auntie D. is “family,” she told Anthony, “and it would be an appropriate gesture on your part to cement friendly relationships and help her restart her life.” Anthony wasn’t sure about handing money over to a “has-been” but, seeing as neither Paige nor DeWitt insisted on a cut, he could afford it.

Anthony now had more than enough to start up that exclusive restaurant/pub in Hogsmeade if he wanted, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to do that. Tom and Paige had to deal with a lot of temperamental customers and Anthony had heard it was worse for restaurants/pub owners. Anthony wasn’t sure he wanted to put up with that. Perhaps he should step into McGonagall’s position once she retired as Hogwarts Headmistress or he could buy some shops and lease them to others as Malfoy did… He could also launch a career in politics once he passed his occlumency course; he already had a support base with the Firsts... The possibilities were endless.

“Oh, look,” said Manasa excitedly as she slipped her arm into the crook of Anthony’s elbow pulling him closer to her. “I think they’re ready to start.”

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“Welcome to the Official H2 Quidditch Re-enactment Match!” boomed the voice of Announcer Jordon Vaughn.

Once the cause of the kidnapping was determined and the “kidnapper” (O’Shea) identified, the students began to reminisce about their time at H2—the good times, of course, and they wanted to share some of their experiences with their families—especially now that they were certain it would never happen again.

The last action of the year Anthony did with his Advisors was plan an event showcasing all of his accomplishments. Anthony selected the Memorial date because, well, the date was a bust anyway with the stupid ceremony (not that he said that part aloud,) and, as he argued to McGonagall, while the Memorial remembered those who had died, his event would commemorate what they all nearly lost which was just, if not more, important than those long gone…

“This is the only quidditch match where the qualification to participate is the ability to make and fly your own broom,” continued Vaughn. “Actually, it isn’t a “re-enactment,” she corrected, “but a real match, but everyone did make their own broom, and uniform, and snitch and bludgers and protective gear… Well, the protective gear was made back at H2,” Vaughn corrected herself again. “Would you believe someone thought to bring all that back with them from H2? Pretty incredible when you think of it,” she added as an aside, “and it was a good thing too. It turns out the Knights at Hogwarts did not like the idea of their body parts being used for, well armor!"

Anyway, before things get going, I’d like to invite everyone to visit the H2 Craft Faire being held under the Twin Oaks near the greenhouses beginning immediately after the game. You can
make your own pollinating moth, start a fire, stitch a bludger, make a broom, watch the self knitting needles knit away and deconstruct your very own curtain. However, the staff requests that you “reconstruct” it back again as these curtains don’t renew like the ones at H2 did. Actually, I don’t recommend you do either as it turns out, the curtains are like, really old and musty, and the string doesn’t look very strong…

Anyway, I recommend you taste some of the delectable H2 treats prepared by Miss Wycliff and her cooking class and take time to watch the artists perform fantastic decorative designs with coloured moths! And don’t worry! We didn’t make the moths with meat scraps—they kept on vanishing after every meal and the ones that didn’t tended to attract the yellow-jackets! So we made them with bits of bread instead.

And when you finish with the faire, make sure you visit the H2 orchard in Lulu’s old pen started by our very own prefect Manasa Basu! You can sprout your own seeds and pick and taste a fresh apple or pear or walnut or peach or pineapple grown from a real tree! And there’s strawberry plants too!” she added enthusiastically. “Believe me, nothing beats the taste of a ripe red strawberry fresh from the vine!

What? What do you mean pineapples don’t grow from trees?” Vaughn questioned some invisible speaker. “Of course they do! Pines are trees! And apples come from trees! Isn’t that what the pine part is in pineapple! No? It should be! Well, that explains why we didn’t have any pineapple trees at H2... But be careful while you’re in the orchard,” Vaughn warned. “The flowers are being pollinated by real bees! We were going to use pollinator moths like we did before,” she explained, “but Su, uh, Miss Breysbury’s bees found the orchard and we couldn’t keep them away! Which reminds me—there’s honey for sale at the faire! Lots of it! Now I know that wasn’t something available at the original H2, but we all wished it was! So, have at it!

Oh yes, at 4:00 the sevenths will demonstrate some of their magnificent pollination swirls in the orchard. Now, I know you think we haven’t enough moths to make it look good, and we don’t—but the Ravenclaws are going to cast a Gemini spell on the ones we have and I promise there will be enough to make a spectacular production! You don’t want to miss—

Oh look!” exclaimed Vaughn with excitement. “The teams are coming in!”

Anthony looked and saw fourteen students each carrying his/her own handmade broom walk onto the pitch.

“The ones with the yellow stripes are the Yellowtail Dragons with team Captain Arthur Reid!” Vaughn added. “And the all-blue ones are the Blue Moon Hippogriffs with Janet Turner as Captain! Don’t they look fantastic in those hand made outfits?” she asked. “I want to remind everyone these teams are made of mixed houses balanced by age, experience and skill...” As Anthony watched, Potter, on his fancy store-bought broom, flew over to the teams. He was carrying a rather large blue bag.

“And now Referee Potter is reminding the teams of the rules,” Vaughn informed the audience. “The Seekers are getting on their brooms first!” observed Vaughn aloud as the seekers mounted their brooms. “Those suits are kind of heavy and it takes real skill to move those brooms about,” she explained. When they finished Vaughn continued telling the audience the obvious as it happened. “The other players have mounted their brooms... The net is raised... Potter is opening the bag... There he goes...” she said excitedly. Albus Potter swooped gracefully through the air dropping the quaffle and snitch in the process... “Look at that!” exclaimed Vaughn with admiration, “another perfect loop-de-loop! And they’re off!”

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Once upon a time there was a beautiful Princess with smooth olive skin, silky long wavy black hair, and big beautiful brown eyes. She lived with her mother and father in a castle on the hill. One sad day the Princess’ father died. So the Princess, scarcely a toddler at the time, and her mother went to live with the Princess’ grandmother (the Princess’ mother’s mum) in a very large castle hidden within a deep dark forest. They lived together for many years. But then a terrible
accident occurred killing the Princess’ mother leaving the Princess alone with her Grandmum. The Princess was very sad...

Further tragedy struck and the grandmother died as well leaving the princess all alone in the castle.

One day a handsome smiling prince with curly brown hair stopped by to visit and he saw the beautiful princess. Did they marry? Of course not, for he was already married with a family of his own. But he was also a distant cousin of the princess and when he saw how lonely the princess was he invited her to live with him and his family in his chateau in the city. The princess accepted the invitation. The prince and his family took very good care of the princess.

And she lived happily ever after...

The End

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed this story as much as I did writing it. Amanda has insisted I do a full 7 years for Holly so yes, there will be another story. Don't have any idea for an over-all plot yet, and am open to ideas... (Anyone out there please, please?????)

In the meantime, I am working on a summer interlude before the final year.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!