Harry Potter and the Invincible TechnoMage

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Harry Potter and the Invincible TechnoMage

by Clell65619

Notes

A/N: I do not own Harry Potter. Nor any of the Marvel Comics Characters mentioned herein. But you knew that.
Chapter 1

A/N: I do not own Harry Potter. Nor any of the Marvel Comics Characters mentioned herein. But you knew that.

A/N2: This is an extremely AU fic starting with 1st year (actually it starts earlier than that, but that will be shown in a chapter or three). This Harry is not the compliant little protoweapon of canon. He has been exposed to the Heroes, Gods, Mutants, Magic users and all the men and women of mystery that the Marvel Universe has to offer. Needless to say Hogwarts and the British Wizarding Society may not know what hit it.

**Harry Potter and The Invincible TechnoMage**

Chapter One – Leaving Home and Making Friends

"I'm guessing this is the place." The tall well dressed man scanned the entrances between Platform Nine and Platform Ten of London's Kings Cross Train station. He checked his watch "half an hour early."

"If you're not early, you're late" said the young boy quoting one of the man's own truisms back to him. The man was getting a continuous stream of appraising looks from the women in the station. The man was oblivious to the female attention he attracted, something that amused the boy to no end.

A small group of oddly dressed people walked briskly up to the wall dividing Platform nine and Platform ten, pushing trolleys laden with old fashioned luggage, and seemingly walked straight through the wall.

The tall man knelt and pulled the boy into a hug. "Take care of yourself Kiddo. I'd go with you, but Stephen said I'd be about as welcome as a skunk."

Most boys his age would be mortified by the idea of being hugged by his father in public. This boy was not most boys and put all his strength into returning the hug. "I know. Please thank Stephen, Steve, Clint, Wanda and Mistress Harkness for helping me get ready for this. Make sure Jarvis, Pepper, Happy and Rhodey know I miss them already. I love you Dad."

The tall man ruffled the mop of hair that several dozen of the world's best (read most expensive) hair dressers all declared totally beyond control. "If you love me you'll email Jarvis and the Power girls as soon as you settle in. That might keep them off my back."

"I will Dad."

"And remember what Agatha said about this culture. Keep your batteries charged. I wish you'd let me armor up that Techsuit of yours."

"Armor's your thing Dad. After I see what I'm up against I might reconsider, but for now, I'll take mobility over armor."

"I had the same discussion with Steve once or twice. But he let me armor him up a couple of times before he rejected the idea out of hand." He smiled. "My own fault for raising a smart kid."

"That and not locking the lab better."

"Pffbt! When I built the security for that lab I got Reed to test it out. It took him 6 hours, an uplink to his Cray-II mainframe AND Ben to get in."
"Wow. I beat him by 5 ½ hours?"

"He still doesn't like talking about it. Ben teases him about it all the time." The tall man smiled, "I don't know if it would bother him as much if you hadn't been nine at the time."

"I'd better go Dad. Wouldn't want to show up early and miss the train by clinging to Daddy. That would mark me as being pretty lame."

The tall man stood smiling. "We can't have anyone thinking you 'lame'. Well, go on then. We'll see you at Christmas."

"Bye Dad." The boy reached down to grab the handle of his trunk. He lifted one side and a pair of wheels allowed it to roll effortlessly. Promising himself not to look back, he approached the hidden entrance between Platform nine and Platform Ten, and passed through, vanishing from sight.

"Goodbye Harry." The tall man said as his son disappeared through the barrier.

It hurt to see him go. Really hurt. Worse than the time the shrapnel from the landmine had nearly killed him. Feeling rather older than his 38 years, he turned and left the station, catching a cab to Heathrow, where a quinjet waited for the ninety minute trip home.

…-ooo000ooo-…

The boy exited the barrier onto the hidden platform. A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to the platform. People crowded everywhere, younger children running to and fro, older kids just acting stupid and goofing off, and a very few of the oldest on the platform making out in secluded corners. A sign overhead said Hogwarts' Express, eleven o'clock.

He looked back at the barrier and saw a wrought-iron archway with the words Platform Nine and Three-Quarters on it.

The first few carriages were already packed with students, some hanging out of the window to talk to their families, some fighting over seats. Harry pulled his trunk down the platform in search of a seat. He passed a round-faced boy, who was saying,

"Gran, I've lost my toad again."

"Oh, Neville," he heard the old woman sigh.

Something gray and hoppy passed his feet. The Boy reached down and grabbed the gray hoppy thing, and it was indeed a toad, he returned to the round faced boy.

"I heard you say you lost a toad? This him?"

"Trevor!" the other boy was ecstatic. "Thanks so much, I thought I'd lost him." He extended his hand "I'm Neville Longbottom."

Taking the offered hand the Boy said "Harry Stark."

"Gran, Trevor's found. Gran, this is Harry Stark. Harry, my grandmother, the Lady Longbottom."

"Ma'am." Said Harry bowing slightly.

Augusta Longbottom shook his offered hand. "Thank you for helping Neville Mr. Stark."

"Mr. Stark is my dad Ma'am. I'm just Harry."
"Is that an American accent I hear Harry?"

"Yes Ma'am. I'm British born, but my guardians were killed in the US while on a business trip, I didn't have any other family to come to here, so I was adopted and stayed in the US." He shrugged. "You could have knocked me over with a feather when Professor Dumbledore came by this last summer and told me I had a place at Hogwarts."

"You're a first year then? So am I." Neville seemed overjoyed at having someone to talk to, his relationship with his grandmother seemed to Harry to be awfully formal. Perhaps he was intimidated by the woman. She did come off somewhat imperious, but Harry knew all about imperious. After all he had told Namor to get his feet off the coffee table at the age of 8.

"Cool, wanna try to get a seat together?" Having someone to talk too sounded good to Harry as well.

"Yes, please," Neville turned to his grandmother. "Thank you Gran, see you at Christmas."

The woman pulled Neville into a hug. "I expect an owl at least once a week young man. Have a good year, make us proud." She released the boy. "It was nice to meet you Mr. Stark, Harry. You have a good year as well."

"Thank you Ma'am."

"Bye Gran!"

Deciding to avoid fighting the crowd, Harry and Neville made their way to the last car on the train, together they got both trunks tucked away in a corner of the last compartment in the last car of the train.

They sat making small talk, waiting to see who if anyone joined them. Neville informed Harry that an average year at Hogwarts was around 50 students. That surprised Harry though he wasn't really sure just why he was surprised at the small size of the school. At 350 students on average, Hogwarts wasn't as large as an average small town high school in the States. This offered one of two explanations, first that Hogwarts was extremely exclusive and took only the best of the best with those not making the cut going to other less prestigious schools, or second the magical population of the UK was extremely small.

Since he hadn't be tested in any way for magical ability, and he had been told that he had been on the list for Hogwarts since he was born coupled with his memories of having nothing to his name as a child, led him in the extremely low population conclusion, which was unto it's self disturbing. Was a population producing an average of 50 children per year viable? Was it self-sustaining? So much to research.

It was then Harry spotted Trevor making another break for it. Snatching the toad up from the floor, Trevor was again returned to Neville.

"Thanks. I don't know why he keeps doing that."

"Just a sec, let me see if I've got something in my trunk for him" Harry went over to his trunk, allowing a second for his Techsuit to interface with the locks, opened it and started digging. Ah, perfect, he pulled out a small cardboard box containing a prototype gyroscope he had been playing with (there were certain advantages in being Tony Starks adopted son when it came to electronic and electrical toys). From the bottom of the trunk he found a truly horrid pair of hand knitted socks from one of Jennifer Walters's maternal phases. Honestly, purple was a horrid color for socks. He had worn them exactly once, just long enough for her to see him wearing them. They would make an
excellent toad nest. He removed the gyroscope and its foam packing from the box, and stuffed the socks into it; he then closed and locked the trunk.

"This ought to work as a Toad Hole."

"Thanks Harry." Trevor was introduced to his new temporary home, and appeared to happily settle in for a nap (though with a toad, who could tell?) Carefully setting the box aside, Neville returned to Harry. "What's a gyroscope?"

"Gyroscopes are tools. They're used for stabilization. Really useful."

The Compartment door slide open. There stood a girl, already wearing her Hogwarts robes; she evidently had come to the station wearing them. "Do you mind if I sit here with you? I can't find anywhere else."

She seemed a bit sad for some reason. Harry's 'Guy-dar' quickly evaluated her as being cute with lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth. Compared to Julie Power, she was fairly plain, but then as far as Harry was concerned most girls were fairly plain compared to Julie Power.

"Grab a seat, lots of room."

"Thank you." She sounded dejected.

Harry and Neville exchanged a look. They both rose and took the trunk she was dragging behind her, putting it in the corner with their own.

"Homesick already?" Neville asked.

"No." she said in a quiet voice. "I already had a seat up front, behind the prefect carriage; some older students came in and threw me out, calling me horrible names. I'm not sure what the names meant, but I can guess."

"You're Muggle born then?" asked Neville.

"Yes." She said, looking like she expected them to turn on her now.

"Idiots." Neville spat. The girl brightened.

"Uh, hating to sound like a clueless schmoe, but what's a Muggle?" Harry hated not knowing things.

"Someone born of non-magical parents." Neville looked to his new friend. "What's a schmoe?"

"It means 'A stupid or obnoxious person.' It's from Yiddish." The girl recited, and then looked embarrassed.

"You've got an interesting vocabulary Harry." Neville turned to the girl "So do you. Who your parents are doesn't matter at all. Magic is magic; your bloodline doesn't mean anything. Look at me, Pureblooded as you can get, verified at least 20 generations back in every branch and I'm practically a squib. What about you Harry?"

"I don't know. Professor Dumbledore told me that my Dad was a pureblood, though I wasn't sure what that meant, and I'm still not all that clear on it. He also said that my Mom was the first witch in her family, and was very powerful. What does that make me?"

"The idiots who care about that sort of thing would call you a half-blood."

"Well, hey look at us, one of each." He turned to the girl "Hi there, Harry Stark, Half-Blood, pleased
to meet you."

She dimpled when she smiled. Harry's estimation of cute spiked to interesting. "Hermione Granger, Muggle-Born, how do you do."

Neville bowed to the two of them "Neville Longbottom, scion of the House of Longbottom, upon turning seventeen I will be made Lord Longbottom of the Ancient and Noble House of Longbottom. Pureblood of course, you may grovel before me."

That broke the three of them up. They were still laughing when the door slid open again and a pair of girls were at the door.

"Can we sit with you? It's getting kind of crowded up front." Asked the Blonde.

"We're first years too." Added the Redhead.

"Come on in," Neville laughed, "as long as you don't mind the conspiracy in here."

The train jolted as it started to move.

"Harry Stark, Half-Blood, welcome to the last compartment of the last car."

"Hermione Granger" she smiled at the new comers "Muggle-Born, come one come all."

"Neville Longbottom, Pureblood, you may grovel."

The new girls joined in the laughter.

"Susan Bones." The red head said "Pureblood, send some of that groveling over here.

"Hannah Abbott, Half-blood. I only grovel if I get paid."

"Hey!" Harry said, noticing the scenery of the train moving through the city at a fairly high rate of speed, "I just thought of something. Hannah, if you and I get together, we'd stop being a pair of oppressed Half-bloods and become one oppressing Whole-blood. Then we could start a reign of terror that would make Ivan the terrible look like Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm!"

Hannah and Hermione joined him in laughing at his silly joke, Susan and Neville just looked perplexed.

"Ivan?" Susan asked.

"Ivan the Terrible, Tsar of the Russians in the 16th century, horrible man, hence the nickname" Hermione said.

"Rebecca?" asked Neville.

"Fictional character, she was all sweetness and goodness." Harry explained. "I'm guessing you don't read a lot of world history or classical stories?"

"No, mostly WIZARDING history and stories" Neville admitted.

"In all fairness, we don't know those." Said Hermione.

"I'm guessing that Hogwarts will teach both sides of the histories."
"So, does anyone have any preferences as to what house you get sorted into?" Hermione asked. "I think Gryffindor sounds the best. They say Dumbledore himself was a Gryffindor."

"Our parents were all Hufflepuffs together, that's how we know each other" Hannah offered.

"They say that houses tend to run in families, but not always." Added Susan.

"My parents were Gryffindors" Neville said. "I don't know if I'll qualify though, I'm not all that brave."

"Brave enough to befriend an ignorant stranger with a yank accent, then go on to make that horrible 'Grovel before me' joke." Harry laughed. "As for me, I have no idea what these 'houses' are all about, I don't even know which one my birth parents were in. I'll just take it as it comes."

The conversation carried on as conversations among pre-teens will, after about three hours after leaving London there was a great clattering outside in the corridor and a smiling, woman slid back the door and said, "Anything off the cart, dears?"

They all went out into the corridor to inspect what was available on the snack trolley. Harry had never heard of any of the items on the cart. There were Bettie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs. Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Licorice Wands, and a number of other strange things. Every thing available appeared to be some variation of a sweet. Harry's snacking had always tended toward salty, and frankly nothing appealed to him, he returned to the compartment empty handed. He noticed that Hermione also came back without anything, shaking her head.

"My parents are both Dentists, they pretty much trained me to avoid sweets. How about you?"

"I'm more of a salty snacker myself. That and my Dad made sure I had a big lunch while he was saying goodbye."

Hannah and Susan returned each with an emergency supply of sweets; Neville came back in with most of a lifetime supply. Harry assisted him in getting to his trunk to stash his stash. When they returned to their seats they found Hermione staring at Trevor's new toad hole.

"Neville, why do you have a gyroscope?"

"My toad Trevor's in there. He was always running off, Harry gave me the box to keep him in."

"Ok, Harry, why do you have a gyroscope?"

"Just a little project I'm working on. I'm trying to stabilize a suspended platform on battery power."

"It won't work at Hogwarts you know. Magic does something to electricity."

"All my toys are geared toward magic, it will be fine."

She gave him an odd look. Then peered more closely at the box. He saw her mouth 'Stark International' she suddenly looked at him with a questioning look. "Harry Stark?"

"Yeah."

"As in Tony Stark?"

"My Dad."
"Do you know Iron Man?"

"Sure. Nice guy. Kinda stiff, but nice."

"Wait, wait, wait, back that up. You're related to Tony Stark, as in the 6th richest man on the planet?" Hannah was suddenly very intense.

"4th. some of his newer inventions just went on the market."

"Harry, have I mentioned how attractive you are?"

"Have I mentioned that I don't inherit any of it?"

"Then I hate you and every thing you stand for."

The compartment again dissolved into laughter.

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Exiting the train in their new Hogswarts robes the five new friends heard the call:

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!" The man speaking was huge. Larger than Thor, but small than Hank Pym at his largest Harry thought. Looking at how the man carried himself Harry doubted he shared the Thunder God's strength, but he was still a sight to behold. The first years were settled into boats "No more'n four to a boat!" Neville, Hermione and Harry piled into one boat, Hannah and Susan got into another with another two girls, all of the boats sailed away from the docks on command.

"Heads down!" the giant yelled as the first boats reached the cliff; they all ducked as the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They went through a long dark tunnel, which went underneath the castle.

The door swung open at once. A tall, black-haired witch in emerald-green robes stood there. She had a very stern face and Harry's first thought was that this was not someone to cross. For all the world she reminded him of much younger Agatha Harkness.

"The firs' years, Professor McGonagall," said the giant.

-ooo000ooo-

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

She led them inside. The stone walls were lit with flaming torches like the ones in a horror movie, the ceiling towered high above them, and a glistening marble staircase facing them led to the upper floors.

Following Professor McGonagall Harry could hear the drone of voices from a doorway. The upper classes must be waiting, but the first years were shown into a small alcove off the hall.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. "The start-of-term feast will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very significant ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwart. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room."
"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any breaking of the rules will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the house cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours.

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I shall return when we are ready for you," said Professor McGonagall. "Please wait quietly."

"How does one get sorted into a house?" A tall boy in the back asked in cultured tones.

"Some sort of test, I think. My brother Fred said it hurts a lot, but he might have been joking." Offered a red headed boy.

Harry frowned. A test seemed unlikely, from Agatha Harkness he knew that the majority of new students were not allowed to do magic under Magical Britain's system. Most of them only got their wands when their school supplies were purchased about a month before. Professor Dumbledore the Headmaster of this school hadn't mentioned anything about a test. Harry concluded that the red head's older brother had been having him on. He then noticed Hermione Granger, was whispering to herself, and mouthing the words very quickly. On the train she has spoken about committing her class books to memory, and now it seemed that she was running through all the spells she'd learned and wondering which one she'd need. Harry smiled. She was quickly becoming more and more interesting. He had never gone through the 'girls are icky' stage that a lot of boys seemed to, and he was really looking forward to getting to know this bushy haired girl.

"Come along now," said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

Professor McGonagall had returned. "Form a line," Professor McGonagall told the first years, "and follow me."

Harry got into line behind a boy with sandy hair, with the red haired boy with the brother named Fred behind him, and they walked out of the chamber, back across the hall, and through a pair of double doors into the Great Hall. This was an amazing place. Lit by thousands of hovering candles the huge room had four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. At the far end the hall was another long table where Adults (presumably the staff) were sitting. Professor McGonagall led the first years to near the staff table so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them. The hundreds of faces stared at them in the flickering candlelight. Scattered among the students, were ghosts shining in a misty silver haze.

Professor McGonagall silently placed a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the stool she placed a stereotypical pointed wizard's hat. This hat was patched and frayed, but even at a distance, Harry could feel the magic in it. He wasn't sure that Mistress Harkness would have approved, the hat felt like it was… Alive.

Everyone in the hall was now staring at the hat, expectantly. For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth — and the hat began to sing:

…-ooo000000-…

A/N:
In every fic with a sorting scene,

The Author includes a song.

With prose abused cruel and mean,

And they go on much too long.

The smart ones just include

The hat's libretto from the canon.

The others, well they're just rude,

And quite abusive to the fanon.

For this fic, let's just assume

The hat was verbose and quite witty.

Because my poetry will clear a room,

It really is that shitty.

For you purists who need the fic to have a sorting song,

And lacking the same would drive you to try to pick a bone.

I would suggest you should please yourself and surely do no wrong,

If you were to reread the verse from the book about the stone.

…-ooo000ooo-…

The whole hall applauded as the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quite still again.

"So we've just got to try on the hat!" Harry heard the Redhead whisper. "I'll kill Fred; he was going on about wrestling a troll."
Professor McGonagall now stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment. "When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said.

"Abbott, Hannah!"

Hannah left the line and put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes. She sat down for a moment until the hat shouted "HUFFLEPUFF!"

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. Harry a fat ghost that looked like a medieval monk waving merrily at her.

The rest of the first years were sorted in a similar manner, they would place the hat on their heads, the hat would decide what house they would go to, and announce the selection at the top of its nonexistent lungs, then the student would go to his or her new house to the thunderous applause of that house. Susan went to Hufflepuff to join Hannah, Hermione joined the Ravenclaws at their table, and Neville went to Gryffindor house.

Harry was taken completely by surprise when his own name was called:

"Potter, Harry!"

Harry stepped forward; ignoring the whispers suddenly broke out all over the hall.

"Potter, did she say?"

"The Harry Potter?"

He didn't understand why almost the entire hall full of people was suddenly craning their necks to get a look at him.

"Professor McGonagall."

"Yes Mr. Potter? Hurry up, sit down and put the hat on."

"My name is Stark, not Potter. Harry Stark.

Harry sat on the stool and lowered the hat over his head. He waited.

"Hmm," said a small voice in his ear. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes — and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting… So where shall I put you?"

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought, I want to learn! I want to be with my friends!

"Learning is important to you, eh?" said the small voice. "Are you sure? You will be great whatever house you go to. Your friends are scattered in three different houses. Ah, you don't care. Are you the one I've been waiting for? The one destined to unite the houses? Let's see now. Slytherin would help you focus that anger I see in you no doubt about that. Gryffindor would let you revel in your courage. Hufflepuff would reward the loyalty to those your trust and believe in. Maybe. Ravenclaw would challenge your mind hmm. I don't recall any student as hard to place as you since I got this responsibility Mr. Potter.

My name is Stark. I'm Harry Stark.
At the Staff Table Dumbledore was becoming concerned. This sorting was well into its tenth minute, longer than any sorting in living memory. He was about to intervene when the hat spoke again.

"Well, if you're sure Mr. Stark — better be RAVENCLAW!"

…-ooo000ooo-…

Following the sorting, the evening meal was served. The meal was interesting unto it's self. Dishes he dimly recalled from what he thought of as 'the bad times' were in front of him along with dishes he didn't recognize at all. He sat with Hermione to his left and Padma Patil on his right. Both the girls were frighteningly intelligent. Upper classmen sat across from them and explained how things in Ravenclaw house worked.

There was a three hour study session for first years every night in the common room, where uppers were available to answer questions and guide the firsties in their studies. These sessions were mandatory until such time as the 7th year prefects judged that the student's where capable and motivated enough to study on their own. The quality of the student's work was of utmost importance to Ravenclaw house.

The Head of house, a diminutive man named Filius Flitwick came by to greet his new first years, and asked each of them to meet him in the Ravenclaw Common room following the feast. The Gray Lady, Ravenclaw's resident ghost, introduced herself to each of the first years.

Finally the meal was done, the Headmaster made some comments, mentioning among other things that the Forbidden Forest was forbidden for a reason, and that exploring a certain third floor hallway would likely result in a painful death. Then the 'school song' was sung. It was sung to whatever tune the individuals happened to like; only the words stayed the same.

The students were then released to go to their dormitories, with the first years told to follow their house's prefects. The Ravenclaw First years were led away on a circuitous route. Harry suspected that this was an intentional way to getting the firsties completely lost. As a bit of good news, he confirmed that his Techsuit was working perfectly, even in the magic field of the castle. He had tested it with his own magic, around Mistress Harkness, at New Salem and even around Wanda when she was tossing her chaos magic around, but it was always possible that Hogwarts might overwhelm it. His Techsuit's onboard inertials were plotting their path (which did indeed include not one but three circles that caused retracing of their path), mean while the suit's optical pickups were identifying landmarks. A few trips around the castle, the Techsuit would be plotting him the fastest path from anywhere in the castle to anywhere else.

The first years with their prefect escort arrived at the entrance to the Ravenclaw dorms. Standing guard was a suit of armor. When approached by a Ravenclaw (it ignored all others) the armor would ask a logic question, upon the proper answer, the wall parted and entrance was allowed. If you got the answer wrong, you had to wait for another person to come along; one question per person was the rule.

The actual dorms were in the vertical tower with the common room at the base. Access alternated with the girl's stairs opening to the odd floors and the boy's stairs opening to the even floors. Each room was a single, with a bed, wardrobe, and desk. There were four rooms on each level, with a common bath. Harry's dorm was on the tenth level. He located his room, unpacked, then grabbing his datapad, headed down to the common room for his interview with Professor Flitwick.

The common room had assigned study carrels around the walls, with long tables in the middle. The fireplace had a fire going in it, giving the room a pleasant temperature. Hermione had beaten him down and had her nose buried deep in a large tome. Hearing him approach, she looked up.
"Hi Harry, isn't this great?"

"It's definitely different." Harry grinned at his friend. "I wonder if there are places where we can hang out with Neville, Hannah and Susan."

Hermione looked a little worried about that. "I don't know, these houses seem awfully insulated. I've been looking you up."

"Me?"

"You didn't tell me you were Harry Potter." She huffed.

"I've been Harry Stark since I was five. The only thing I remember about being Harry Potter was being hungry and being punished a lot. Why is everyone so interested in me?"

"Harry, you killed the last Dark Lord."

"Me."

"Yes." She smiled at him.

"I killed a Dark Lord."

"Yes."

"Right." She had to be having him on. "What's a 'Dark Lord'?"

"An evil wizard Harry. According to Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century you defeated the Dark Lord Voldemort when you were 15 months old by reflecting his Avada Kedavra after he killed your parents."

"Wait, he killed two Adult wizards, and I killed him as a toddler? That's just stupid."

Hermione looked a bit offended. "That's what the book says."

Padma Patil approached her study carrel, which was in between his and Hermione's. "It's true Harry. Everyone knows your story in the Wizarding world, except for where you disappeared to. There are even Harry Potter dolls; they look just like you, only with shorter hair." She blushed "My sister and I both have one."

"That may be the story 'everyone knows' but it makes no sense. I mean, I'm 15 months old. The two adults in the house are killed. This 'dark lord' clown is defeated, and believed killed. My little squalling baby talking self is found. The sole survivor. Who knows what happened? Who came up with this story that 'everyone knows'?"

"But Harry, your scar."

"Yes Padma, I've got a curse scar on my forehead, believe me I know. But the Avada Kedavra kills without leaving a mark, right? I mean that's how it's written about. I've got a scar, so whatever it comes from is certainly isn't the unblockable, unstoppable, kills every times its tried Avada Kedavra."

Harry shook his head; this was crazy, pure and simple. Dolls? There are dolls that looked like him? They all believe he survived the Killing Curse. Insane. He set the datapad on the desktop of his study carrel, extended the keyboard and turned it on.
"That won't work here Harry."

Turning he found the young woman who had introduced herself at dinner as Penelope Clearwater, one of the fifth year prefects. Harry still wasn't clear on exactly what a 'prefect' was, but understood her to be an authority figure.

"Muggle Electronics don't work around magic." She continued.

"These do." Harry said. "My dad found a way to shield them from magic's chaotic influence, and to draw energy from it." He pointed to the screen, which had just lit up as the datapad processed through its startup sequence. "In fact, most of my tech gets its power from my magic. My dad did an in depth study of how my magic was trashing his systems. It took him almost a year to figure out how to shield for it, then another 3 months to develop the Powertap technology that powers all my systems."

Penelope frowned. "Wizards have been trying for years to make electronics work around magic."

"No, they tried to make electronics work despite magic. Dad figured how to make them work WITH magic. Very different things. That and he's one of the smartest guys around."

The datapad spoke with a male monotone voice. "Good Evening Harry Stark."

"Access Starknet" Harry instructed. He noticed he suddenly had a crowd of fellow first years and Penelope crowding around.


There was a short pause while a small arm extended from the datapad. "Ready for Identity Verification:"

Harry moved so that the red tip of the arm was level to his left eye and about 4 inches away. "Scan."

The red tip of the arm lit up suddenly. "Retina scans complete. Harry Stark confirmed."

"Open Email."

Harry sat back as the email application opened on the screen.

"That is amazing. How big a vocabulary does it have?"

"The command table has a vocabulary of 200 words. For most functions, it's still a keyboard interface, but what more do you need for a smart terminal?" He smiled at Hermione's reaction, wondering what she would say if he showed her his Techsuit.

20 minutes passed before Professor Flitwick came to the Common room. In that time, Harry had written to both Edwin Jarvis, and Julie Power to tell of his adventures so far.

Harry was the third new Ravenclaw to be interviewed by his head of house. The small man explained the house policies and his expectations of student behavior. Harry was attentive and took notes, which the teacher seemed to appreciate.

"So, do you have any questions for me Mr. Stark?"

"Yes sir, I do. I was hoping you could explain all this 'killed a dark lord as an infant' silliness to me."
"Well Mr. Stark, it's what happened, it's well documented."

"Documented? By who? I mean I'm the only survivor of the attack; no one else was there and survived. Who came up with this story? And why?

…-ooo0000oo-…
"And that covers the announcements for this morning." Dumbledore idly stirred his tea. He always allowed Minerva to run these staff meetings, when he did it they tended to veer off on odd tangents.

"So Filius, What can you tell us about young Mr. Potter?"

The diminutive Charms Master looked up from his notes. "Well, to begin with Minerva, as he told you last night, he wants to be known as Harry Stark. He is quite devoted to his adoptive father, and has few memories of being a Potter. He is a startlingly intelligent young man."

"Wonderful, another year of yammering children, and a celebrity to make it all the more memorable."

"Severus, if he is a celebrity that is the doing of others, not Mr. Stark. He was introduced to his own legend last night by a fellow first year. Miss Granger is Muggle-born who after noticing the reaction to the Potter name, looked him up.

"And what was his reaction to learning his 'legend' as you put it?" Dumbledore looked up from his tea.

"Disbelief actually. Mr. Stark is blessed with an exceptionally logical outlook. He immediately questioned the story and wanted to know its source. He actually asked me to explain the documented history of the events in Godric's Hollow when he pointed out that there was a single surviving witness of the event, himself. He asked where the account had come from. He also questioned the reasonableness of the account, pointing out that his parents, two powerful and fully trained magic users died at You-Know-Who's hand, and that the story had a mere infant destroying their killer. He was most adamant that this made no sense."

"Did you explain his mother's sacrifice?" Poppy Pomfrey asked.

"Yes, and he scoffed at that. He asked if Lilly Potter was the only mother to sacrifice herself in an attempt save her child from the Death Eaters. The longer we discussed that night, the less sense it made."

"He's just looking to stir up trouble. What do you expect of the spawn of James Potter?"

"Severus, he may look somewhat like James Potter, but Harry is nothing like him. James was highly intelligent, but lazy. He didn't apply himself to his studies until he decided he wanted to impress Lilly
Evans, as you well know. I know I've only spent 20 minutes speaking with young Mr. Stark, but I can tell you. The boy is very intelligent, and is driven to impress someone. But whoever that might be, he or she is not in this castle." Flitwick shook his head. "There's something else about the boy. He's brought Muggle Electronics to the castle."

The Potions Master barked a harsh laugh. "Some of the Muggle-born or Muggle-Raised always do. Is the boy pouting because his toys don't work?"

"His toys DO work, otherwise why would I mention it? He has something he calls a 'Datapad'. With it, he accessed what he called the 'Stark International Corporate Data Base' and pulled an amazing amount of cross referenced information about this area, including what he called 'Satellite Images' of this Castle."

"That's not possible." Snape spat. "The boy is trying to pull something; all magical structures are invisible to Muggles and their Technology."

"I think you mean it used to be Severus." Flitwick sipped his tea. "After my conversation with Mr. Stark last night, I did some research of my own. Harry's adopted Father is a certified genius, with more patents in the field of Muggle Electronics than any other living soul. Given that his adopted son is magical, and the boy's mere presence would disrupt his technology, why is it surprising that such a man might find a way for his technology to work with magic and be able see through our wards?"

A murmur swelled from the table. "I'm afraid there's more. Hogwarts will not be young Harry's first foray into magical education. He has received extensive tuition in chaos magics by Wanda Maximoff no less."

"Chaos magic? That's what killed Selene Lovegood last year" gasped Poppy Pomfrey

"Potter's lying." Snape was building to a rant. "There is no way for an eleven year old to have access to that kind of magic. Maximoff publishes her books and disappears. There are those who doubt she even exists."

"She disappears to the Muggle world Severus. That's where she lives. The Muggle press reports her to be in regular contact with Harry's adopted father. When he told me of his exposure to Chaos Magics, and his other education he was unaware of how rare it was for a Hogwarts student to receive such tuition."

"You said 'other education' Filius?" the normally robust Pomona Sprout was looking pale. "What 'other education'?"

"During the accident that killed his blood relatives and for some weeks following Harry exhibited prolonged bouts of accidental magic. Not knowing what it was, but somehow recognizing it for magic, the elder Stark contacted an associate for help. From the age of five years until last month, Harry has received periodic training from Stephen Strange."

A shocked silence filled the chamber. Relations between Wizarding Britain and the Sorcerer Supreme were testy at best, ever since an 8 man Obliviator team responded to a battle Strange was fighting against a horde of demons in London and attempted to remove the former surgeon's memories of the event on the justification that he was a Muggle. When the Obliviator team called for help, a 12 man team of Special Tactics Aurors responded.

Strange had deposited all 20 men, bound and senseless on the desk of the Minister of Magic and instructed the man in no uncertain terms to not involve his provincial wand waving fascists in the business of those wielding true magic.
The Minister of course (immediately after making a change of robes) issued an arrest warrant for the Sorcerer Supreme, accompanied by a 'don't bother to take alive' order. Oddly no Auror ever found Stephen Strange, though he often was seen by common Wizarding folk in the streets of several of Britain's major cities. There were suggestions that the Aurors weren't trying all that hard to find him.

"Alright Filius, Mr. Stark has had instruction in Chaos magic and has been a Sorcerers apprentice, anything else?"

The small man hesitated. "Yes. Harry tells me his principle teacher since he was six years old was Agatha Harkness."

A gasp ran through the assembled staff.

Dumbledore stood. "Several of you will have Mr. Stark in your classes. I would like to have reports on his abilities and his progress in your class through the year. I thank you for your attendance at this meeting. Our next meeting will be at 7am Monday next. Minerva, if you would stay?"

McGonagall waited until the rest of the staff had filed from the room. "How could this have happened Albus?"

Dumbledore removed his glasses and pinched his nose, attempting to ward off a headache. "I don't know Minerva, the Dursleys go on a business trip taking Harry with them and they drop out of existence. It was only when the enchantments that drive the Hogwarts letters enacted that I could find him again. Minerva, I need to know where he is in his education. Would you consider contacting your Great Aunt?"

Classes started the next day. The Ravenclaw's first class was double transfiguration with Professor McGonagall. Just as he has assumed McGonagall was not a teacher to cross. Strict and exacting, her first words in the class room set the theme for the year.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," she said. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

She then demonstrated her talent by changing a desk into a pig and then back again. The combined Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff class were dazzled by McGonagall's display, and couldn't wait to get started, but it did not take long for the class to realize that none of them would be changing the furniture into anything, much less a living animal any time soon. The Professor presented them with a long involved lecture. After most of an hour and a half of note taking, they were each given a match and started trying to turn it into a needle.

Sitting at the table in the front row with Hermione to his left and Padma to his right, Harry noticed the looks of strained concentration on both their faces. He did not notice Minerva McGonagall watching him.

"Don't try and force it, just let the magic flow."

"What do you mean Harry?" Padma looked up at him.

Harry ran his hand through his mop of hair. "Ok, look at the match," they were both still looking at him. "I mean it, really look at the match. Get a complete image of it in your mind; does the stick have a flaw? Is the head unsymmetrical? Pretend you need to be able to identify your match stick out of a box of 500. Got it?" Both girls nodded, still concentrating on their matches. "Now take the hand you don't use for your wand, and cup it behind the match. Put your wand just over the match without
touching it. Got it?” Again they nodded. “Close your eyes. Picture the matchstick in your mind, after you can see it, picture the one of the ends as coming to a point, and the other flattening and having an eye. Ok, keeping that image of a pointed matchstick with an eye in your mind, start imagining made of some metal. Think of a metal you're familiar with. Think about how it feels, how it smells, what that metal tastes like. Complete the image. The image in your mind should be your needle now right?” Both girls nodded. “Open your eyes.”

Both of the young Ravenclaws opened their eyes to see a needle where the match stick had been. They both gasped excitedly. Professor McGonagall had been watching the entire time, her eyes wide in amazement.

“Well done Miss Patil, Miss Granger. Five points to Ravenclaw, each.”

The girls squealed happily as the bell rang ending the period. “Everyone turn in your matches. While you're up here, take a look at Miss Patil and Miss Granger's work. I would like 12 inches on the practical application on transmutation of wood to metal by Wednesday. Mr. Stark, stay behind if you would?”

The class filed out. Harry finished stowing his text in his book bag. After the last student had left the classroom she turned to Harry.

"Mr. Stark, it was nice of you to assist your classmates like that and with an interesting technique as well, but you didn't do your own work. I would rather not give a student who knows what he is doing a zero for the day, would you care to stay here and do your assignment rather than go to lunch?"

Harry nodded and picked up the match, then handed it to her. "Here you go Professor."

Minerva McGonagall looked into her hand and found a silver needle. She couldn't have done the transformation that effortlessly.

"You didn't use your wand."

"No Ma'am. I'm still getting used to using a wand. My teachers didn't use them or teach using them."

"And one of your teachers was Agatha Harkness?"

"Yes Ma'am. Mistress Harkness has been my principle teacher for as long as I can remember."

"Thank you Mr. Stark. Run along to lunch now."

"Thank you Ma'am.” The boy left the classroom.

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Harry entered the Great Hall, and spotting Hermione made his way to join her.

"Hi Harry!"

"Nev! How's Gryffindor treating you?"

"Ah, nobody grovels to Purebloods in Gryffindor. Woe is me."

"Don't worry; your purity will see you through. Have you got this place figured out yet? Is there someplace to study with people from other houses?"
"Not a clue, after the feast last night, it was unpack and straight to bed, then this morning was Herbology and Charms. Double Transfiguration this afternoon with our head of house."

"Had her this morning. She's strict, but she knows her business. Hopefully there's somewhere we can get together and hang out. I'm starving Nev, see you later."

"Later Harry!"

Harry slide onto the bench next to Hermione and started filling his plate. The bushy haired girl smiled at him.

"Thanks for the help in class. I don't know if I'd have gotten it without your help."

"You'd have gotten it, both of you." Harry nodded to Padma across the table. "McGonagall teaches a good lesson, but I think she wants us to discover the flow of magic for ourselves."

"You talked us through the transfiguration Harry, but I'm still not sure what we did."

"Look Padma, think of it like this; when you pick up a fork, do you have to think about what every muscle and ligament has to do in order to pick up the fork? Of course not, you just do it. Magic is the same way. For some reason the people who teach like to make you think about every step along the way, when all you've got to do is do it." He took a bite of the meatloaf on his plate, after swallowing he continued. "Magic really boils down to 4 steps. 1. Recognize what you want to do. 2. Visualize what you want to do. 3. Intend to do what you want to do, and 4. Do it. The wand waving and incantations are all just focusing exercises that teach you to use your intent and your will to make what you want to happen, happen.

Hermione looked perplexed. "There must be more to magic than that."

"Why? Is there more to moving your arm than that?"

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The first class following lunch was Defense Against the Dark Arts. The lessons were a bit, well, odd. The classroom smelled strongly of garlic, Harry felt like he was in a bad Italian restaurant. The rumor was that Quirrell was attempting to ward off a vampire he'd met in Romania and was afraid would be coming back to get him one of these days. The man's turban, he told them, was supposed to be a gift from some unnamed African Prince as a reward for getting rid of some Zombie, but Harry wasn't sure he believed this story, knowing that most of what remained of Africa's royalty would be far more likely to call on T'Challa than some stuttering Englishman. In the unlikely event that T'Challa needed help he would call on Stephen Strange. Besides that, Harry was hard pressed to think of an African tribe that would award a turban. Whenever someone asked about the Professor's adventures, Quirrell would go all pink and started talking about the weather.

But here something not right here. Harry felt his mental defenses tested time and again, particularly when Quirrell's back was turned to him. He instructed the Techsuit to scan Quirrell. The results of that scan indicated two separate entities in the Teacher's body. This was odd… A familiar perhaps. Harry wasn't aware of any familiars capable of mind magics, but that didn't mean that there weren't any.

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Potions lessons took place down in one of the dungeons. It was quite cold in the lower levels of the castle, which struck Harry as odd, being below ground as they were. The walls of the classroom
were lined with pickled animals floating in glass jars. The overall effect was 1950s movie mad scientist chic. Hermione and Padma sat together at one of the tables. Harry sat at the table behind them and was joined by one of the Hufflepuffs, Justin Finch-Fletchley.

Professor Snape started the class by taking the roll call, he paused at Harry's name.

"Ah, Yes," he said softly, "Harry Potter. Our new — celebrity."

"Harry Stark sir. I'm hardly a celebrity."

"Two points from Ravenclaw for your cheek boy. In this class you are Potter."

Snape finished calling the names and looked up at the class. His eyes were black, cold and empty. Harry thought about arguing with the twit, but decided that an official complaint would probably be more profitable.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion making," Snape had the gift of keeping a class's attention with little effort. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses… I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, and even stopper death— if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

More silence followed this little speech. Harry and Justin exchanged looks.

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

"Asphodel and wormwood make a powerful sleeping potion known as the Draught of Living Death, sir," said Harry.

Snape's lips curled into a sneer. "Lucky guess Potter? Let's try again. Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a ruminant animal, usually a goat and it will save you from most poisons sir."

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

"Monkshood and wolfsbane, are different names for the same plant, it is also known as aconite. There are more than 250 species of aconite. Aconites are herbaceous perennial plants that are chiefly native to mountainous parts of the northern hemisphere, growing in moisture retentive but well draining soils of mountain meadows. They have dark green leaves that lack stipules. They are palmate or deeply palmately lobed with 5–7 segments. Each segment again is 3-lobed with coarse sharp teeth. The leaves have a spiral or alternate arrangement. The lower leaves have long petioles."

'Take that asshole.' He added silently. For the first time he was thankful for an assignment from Mistress Harkness. This ass thought he was intimidating; he was nothing next to her. Still, why had she required him to produce a 2000 word essay on Aconites just last month? It had nothing to do with the potion she had been teaching him, it had puzzled Harry at the time. Was Mistress Harkness some kind of seer?

Well?" Snape turned on the rest of the class. "Why aren't you all taking notes?"

There was a sudden rummaging for quills and parchment. Over the noise, Snape snatched up Harry's
Datapad and said,

"50 points will be taken from Ravenclaw House for bringing your filthy Muggle toys to class, Potter." He flung the Datapad across the room, where it hit the wall with a crunch, falling to the floor, bits of plastic bouncing away from the main body.

"You will pay for that Professor."

The entire class stared at Harry as he stood up from his stool, and began to gather his things into his bookbag.

"Are you threatening me Potter?"

"Not at all Professor. You willfully damaged my personal property in a childish fit. You will pay for the damage you caused. We can do this like adults, or if you prefer to carry on the way you have started, I can get lawyers involved, and then you can pay for the damage you caused, court costs and my lawyers." Harry shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me either way."

"Sit down Potter. A week's detention might teach you your place."

"No."

"What did you say Potter." Snape hissed threateningly.

"I said no. I will not attend any detention you assign. I do not recognize you as having any authority over me. I have no time for bullies or cowards, and you sir, are both. There is nothing you know that I wish to learn." He shouldered his bag and turned his back to the Potions Master, making to leave the room.

In a smooth motion Severus Snape drew his wand and he was sub vocalizing the stunning spell that would teach 'Potter' a lesson when four tentacles suddenly sprouted from the boy's robes. The class gasped when they saw four spots of light on Snape's body, one between his eyes, one over his heart, and two on either side of his navel. Harry stopped as soon as the tentacles had manifested, and slowly turned around. The tentacles maneuvered about his body to allow the movement, never dropping their focus on Snape for an instant.

"Professor, your hostile act has triggered the defensive protocols of my Techsuit. Lower your wand before you get hurt."

"What are those things Potter?"

"They are the weapons module of my Techsuit. The one aimed between your eyes is currently set to disable and will deliver a milliliter of a very painful blinding agent. The one over your heart is a Stark International Series 12 pulse laser, which will kill you. The two targeted on your abdomen are a Stark International Series 4 taser unit, which will disable you with 250,000 volts of electricity, and the other a Stark International force beam projector, commonly known as a 'repulsor', which depending on its intensity will either knock the wind out of you, cut you in half and everything inbetween. Which of the weapons used is decided by the Artificial intelligence of the Techsuit, in proportional response to any offensive act on your part." Harry smiled ruefully. "I know that the weapons I have described are outside your understanding, but allow me to assure you that you do not want them to be used on you. Lower your wand, sir."

"Idiot boy!" snarled Snape, "do you really think you can scare me with your filthy Muggle toys?"

Harry felt the telltale tickle of someone testing his mental defenses. "Ah, you are a legimens. That
won't do you any good Professor, the Techsuit's AI will respond whether I am conscious or not. Do I think I can scare you? I guess that depends on whether you are smart enough to know that there are things you do not know."

"I will have you expelled for this Potter."

"You will try Sir, I suspect that it will come down to who the Headmaster wants here more, you or me."

Snape lowered his wand, and the Techsuit's tentacles lowered, and then retreated back inside Harry's robes.

"Class is dismissed. Potter you will accompany me to the Headmaster office. Say good bye to your little friends, you won't be seeing them again."

"I am not overly concerned about the threats of a coward who attempted to hex me in the back Professor." He smiled at the rage on the man's face. "Nor one who cannot seem to learn my name."

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Harry followed the fuming Potions Master into the Headmaster's office silently. The aged wizard looked up at the pair in surprise.

"And to what do I owe this visit?"

"Headmaster, this idiot boy threatened me. I demand his expulsion."

"Mr. Stark?"

"Professor Snape was abusive and derogatory toward me for no reason Headmaster. He began the class by docking Ravenclaw two points when I told him my name was no longer Potter, and insisted on calling me Potter for the rest of the time I was in his class room. He destroyed my Datapad for no reason, calling it, and I quote a "filthy Muggle Toy" and docked Ravenclaw 50 points. After informing Professor Snape that I would be billing him for the willful destruction of my property, I then collected my things to leave the abusive environment. When my back was turned the coward in your employ pulled his wand and started to hex me in the back, triggering my Techsuit's defensive protocols. After I explained how much damage my tech could and would do to him, he dismissed the class, and escorted me here."

"The boy's a liar Headmaster."

"Somehow I thought a gutless coward might try the 'boy is lying' gambit, so I have the recordings my Techsuit made available for you Headmaster. Techsuit. Display time in Potions Classroom. Audio and Visual." One of the tentacles extended from Harry's robes and a hologram projected from it to the desktop of the headmaster's desk. The recording ran from the time Harry entered the classroom until he left it following Snape.

When the recording was done playing. Harry looked to the pair of silent adults. "Headmaster, Now that we have established beyond a doubt that this man is a liar, and a coward, I refuse his punishments. For whatever reason, he has a grudge against me. If my refusing his punishments is not acceptable, I will be leaving. Remember Headmaster, you came to me speaking of fulfilling my destiny by coming to Hogwarts. If the destiny you have in mind involved dealing with this cowardly bully, I'll leave you to it. Professor Snape, that Datapad you destroyed is perfectly allowable under school policy. I specifically asked the Headmaster if I could use such a device for note taking before I accepted my place here."
"Actually Harry, when I said that I had no idea that your device would work."

"Ah, your little joke for the Muggle raised then? I guess the joke is on you. The Datapad was one of 12, limited run technology. Each unit cost in excess of $128,000 dollars. At Friday's exchange rate to the pound, and pound to Galleon, I estimate you owe me 14,220 Galleons. I will of course be producing an itemized invoice for your 'purchase'. I'll give you until the end of the month to make restitution. If you do not, I will be contacting a solicitor and we'll find out if the British Magical Courts believe in the concept of 'punitive damages'. Headmaster, I also expect the points taken from Ravenclaw by this man be returned. If he is to remain employed here despite his obvious moral and character flaws, I will want a public apology in the Great Hall, at Dinner, as well as a public promise to stay out of my mind."

"Do you feel it appropriate for a student to dictate terms Mr. Stark?"

"No, I don't Headmaster. I leave it to you to dictate terms. I simply outlined the terms in which I am willing to stay here."

"And what of your punishment for threatening a teacher Mr. Stark?"

Harry smiled. "I will gracefully accept that punishment as soon as Professor Snape is arrested for attempted assault with a deadly weapon. If the school isn't interested in justice, perhaps the Aurors are. Also, are you aware he carries a protean charm on his left arm? Isn't that the marking of the terrorist group that people seem to feel I beheaded as an infant."

"I am aware of the mark, yes. I might ask how you are aware of it."

"My tech is sensitive to magic, especially the magic of those who are displaying hostile intent toward me. For example are you also aware that Professor Quirrell has some sort of entity under his turban?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"I don't appreciate legimancy being used on me. Professor Snape has tried it, whatever it is under Quirrell's turban has tried it, and you are trying it right now Headmaster. Mistress Harkness showed me some rather unpleasant defensive charms for mind magics, the people who trigger said charms can be easily identified by the way they lay on the ground screaming while clawing at their own eyes. Like I said, most unpleasant. Was there anything else Headmaster?"

"No Mr. Stark, you may go."

"Thank you Headmaster. Good day Professor Snape, I'll be getting you that invoice."

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Harry Potter and The Invincible TechnoMage

Chapter Notes

A/N: I do not own Harry Potter. Nor any of the Marvel Comics Characters mentioned herein. But you knew that.

A/N: I do not own Harry Potter. Nor any of the Marvel Comics Characters mentioned herein. But you knew that.

A/N2: Ok, wow. I'm guessing that people are liking this fic (at least so far) Almost 400 reviews on the two sites it's posted on. It never occurred to me that there were so many comics geeks out there.

Harry Potter and The Invincible TechnoMage

Chapter Three – Troll in the Castle

May 9 1985:

Stark Industries Project Achilles facility

French Lick, Indiana.

The man entered the remains of the control center at a dead run. A quick glance around showed him the fire suppression system had done its job, but as the 8 hastily covered bodies showed nothing could have been done about the explosions.

"Tony!" The largest man in the room called him over.

"Has anyone determined what happened Happy?"

Happy Hogan nodded. "Yeah a facilities tour for the Achilles project, the rep from that Brit firm Grunnings and the rep from the French company Picard as well as their families. We've just got the security tapes on line."

The handheld screen flickered into life. The picture blurred as the tape fast forwarded to a few seconds before the explosion that had killed so many. When the picture stabilized it showed a view of the control room. There were 2 technicians, 3 in the French companies group (Madam Trouseau, her husband and son) and 4 in the British (Mr. Dursley, his Wife, son and nephew) Tony Stark touched the controls to freeze the display.

"Happy, I count nine people on screen. We're missing a body.

"Yeah, the Brit's nephew. Sweet little guy, nothing at all like the rest of the family."

The display started again. The technicians were demonstrating control room functions, when the Dursley boy jumped forward and started flipping switches and turning remote valve operations. The tech attempted to stop the boy when the elder Dursley prevented the tech from doing so. The boy..."
continued to manipulate the control panel. Stark froze the display again.

"Right there. The little shit just opened the feeds full open and shut down the overpressure relief system. Nine dead because that fat moron let his kid play with the controls."

The display started again. Suddenly alarms started (the silent display showed the flashing lights of the alarms.) The techs threw the fat man out of the way and seized the fat little boy to move him. Standing next to his aunt, the tiny boy in spectacles looked around fearfully and tugged at the sleeve of his aunt, who promptly backhanded him across the room. From the area of the room where the little boy had been thrown, the display rippled, then all of the electronics in the room failed simultaneously.

"Odd, why did the display fail before the explosion?"

"I don't know Tony, like I said we just got it back online, we had to replace…"

"Happy! Over here!" one of the Emergency Response team called out.

Stark and Hogun ran to the man. The team had lifted some of the largest pieces of debris from this corner and found a shimmering electric blue sphere of force. Inside that sphere was a terrified crying raven haired little boy.

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Hermione and Padma came down the stairs looking forward to their second day of class. It would be interesting to see if the concepts Harry had shown them the day before would be useful in their other classes. Padma stopped at the foot of the stairs and gasped.

It was Harry. He was in a lotus position, floating three feet off the ground cloaked in a golden aura.

"My great grandfather does that" Padma whispered. "I didn't think that any westerners even knew about it. It's a meditation technique combined with magic. Only the most powerful can do it."

"So they don't teach it here?"

"I don't know if any of the teachers can do it much less teach it. Dumbledore probably, he's a legend. But no, they don't teach doing that."

"Should we tell him we're going to breakfast, or just leave him?" Hermione looked conflicted.

Padma pondered for a second. "When Great Grandfather does it he tends to lose track of time. We probably ought to tell him we're going." The dark haired girl approached Harry, stopping just outside of his aura. "Harry?"

The boy opened his eyes, displaying a black void.

"Harry, we're going to breakfast. Hermione and I thought you should know."

Harry nodded. He slowly settled to the ground, aura fading and he stood. "Thanks. I always lose track of time when I do that."

"What exactly were you doing Harry?"

"It's a meditation technique Hermione. One of my teachers showed me how to use it to organize my thoughts, and to do so without emotion. He gets mad because he needs his levitation cloak to float. When we do it together, I orbit around him, tics him off something awful. I usually do it about once a
"What did you figure out?" Padma asked as they went down the first staircase.

"That I was an ass yesterday with Snape. He was an ass too, but I let him make me angry and I went all search and destroy on him."

"He attacked you as soon as you walked into the classroom Harry."

"He definitely has a grudge for some reason. I did a little research last night in the library. He was a class mate of my biological parents. There was a group back then called the Marauders, and James Potter was one of them. From the descriptions they were a sadistic bunch of pranksters who would abuse anyone who they felt didn't measure up to their standards. Professor McGonagall mentioned how much I resemble my biological father, maybe Snape and he had a history that I don't know about. At any rate I've got to do something about the situation." He smiled at the girls. "But first, I'm hungry. Mind if I join you for breakfast?"

The morning class was charms with Professor Flitwick. Once again Harry found himself to be embarrassingly ahead of the rest of his class. He levitated his feather almost instantly, and coaxed Hermione and Padma through doing their own. Both the girls were capable, but really didn't believe they could perform at the level they were capable of. Belief was as much a part of magic as any other function. As Mistress Harkness had stressed to him far too many times, if you don't believe you can do something, you can't.

Once class was over, he excused himself as the girls went to lunch, and headed down to the potions classroom. *Make this right stupid* he told himself. *Winning a stupid battle that sours the entire war is dumb. Control yourself.* He knocked at the door and opened it to Snape's "Enter."

The Potions Master was at his desk at the head of the classroom grading papers. His eyes widened in surprise when he recognized the boy at the door. "What do you want Po... Stark?"

"Professor Snape. I came to apologize for my behavior in your class yesterday. I am here to let you know that I am withdrawing my complaint to the Headmaster, and I am humbly requesting that I be allowed to rejoin your class."

The sallow man's eyes narrowed. "What are you up to Stark? Between your recordings and my loss of self control, you stand every chance of making your case."

"Yes Sir. That is a probability. But what would that win me? If you remained at Hogwarts it isn't like you would forget what I did, and our every interaction for the next seven years would be tinged by it. If you left Hogwarts, I would lose access to the man who is noted as being one of the 10 best brewers in the world. It is unlikely that whoever they could get to replace you would have your skill."

Severus Snape continued to stare at the boy. What was his game? Albus had spent several hours making the point that Snape had gone too far with the boy. Now James Potter's son was here apologizing to him? Would that arrogant ass have apologized for anything?

"I accept your apology Mr. Stark, and I expect to see you in class."

"Thank you sir. I appreciate this." The boy turned to leave, and seemed to hesitate.

"Was there anything else Mr. Stark?"
"Yes Sir. I'm just not sure that my asking would be appropriate. May I ask a question about our class?"

"You may. I will let you know if it is appropriate."

"Thank you Sir. I was wondering why you took such an immediate dislike to me. I'm told that I bear a strong resemblance to my biological father. Is that the source of our conflict?"

"I am ashamed to say that it might be Mr. Stark."

Harry nodded. "When I was trying to understand what happened yesterday I dug into the library, where I found that you and my biological parents were classmates. I also found references to a group of pranksters known as the Marauders, which had my biological father as a member. These 'Marauders' were reputed to be vicious in their 'pranks', and I assumed that you were the victim of their ire."

"I am not James Potter, Sir. I have no memories of the man. I hope we can get through this, so that I can learn from you. When would you like me to report for the detentions sir?"

"I believe we will be forgetting about the detentions this time, Mr. Stark. Perhaps it will be best if we start fresh in the next class. And your Muggle device?"

"I was thinking that I should have cleared the uses of my Datapad with you before bringing it to class. I believe I can chalk it's destruction up to an accident. Am I correct to assume that you would prefer I not bring my spare to class?"

Snape paused. The boy had a 'spare' unit of a device that cost 14,000 galleons? He was capable of writing off such an amount? "Actually, I had an interesting conversation with Professor Flitwick on the potential of your device. I was thinking that it might be interesting what you might be able to do with it in potions. You had best get to lunch Mr. Stark. You will need your wits about you in the green houses."

"Yes Sir. Thank you for your time." Outside the door, Harry leaned against the wall of the corridor and wondered if he had repaired the situation between Snape and himself or made things worse.

At his desk, Severus Snape reflected on what had just happened. The boy was most specifically not James Potter. Nor was he anything like Lilly. Perhaps it would be wise to treat the boy as if he had just fallen from the sky. Albus, at least, would be pleased.

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"Well?"

"He forgave me Padma. Life is good."

"Forgave you? He attacked and insulted you."

"And I responded like a pavlovian dog. I have to be better than that."

"I don't understand why you backed down after yesterday. You had won."

Harry took out a Muggle notepad. "Look. He drew stick figures of himself and Snape. "I carry out with my threats. He gets a reprimand, I'm still in his class, but he's wary of doing anything TO me. BUT." He added stick figures with Rs on them, "Every other Ravenclaw in the castle is now a target. There are ways that someone in a strong position can destroy someone in a weak position
without actually doing anything to the actual person.” Harry took a drink from the goblet in front of him. Pumpkin juice? Vile stuff. He switched to water to get the taste out of his mouth. "This way, I've apologized to him, mentioned that I've discovered that my father was a contemporary of his in school, and hoped aloud that James Potter having been an ass to him isn't going to interfere with his teaching me to brew potions in his inimitable way. I stroke his ego, talk bad about someone he obviously dislikes, and ask him for forgiveness. He was surprised, and gave his forgiveness. To test if he meant it, I asked when I should report for detention, he told me we would have a fresh start in the next class. Bingo, Bango, Bongo, the problem is, if not solved, then at least managed. After all, he IS one of the premier potions brewers in the world. If this works, and I can keep my temper under control, then we get to learn from one of the best, with only minor conflicts."

Hermione looked shocked. "That's so calculated. Did you plan this from the beginning?"

"No, I got angry yesterday and was stupid. Today I did damage control. I learned this watching my dad. In business he says it's important for the other guy to not actively hate you, and anything that you do to make him not hate you is good business. That philosophy just seemed to fit this situation perfectly."

"Well hurry up and eat oh Master Manipulator" Padma laughed at him. "Herbology starts in 15 minutes."

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Herbology was a class where Harry started on a par with the rest of the class. Madam Harkness had never covered it, explaining that it was too resource intensive for a single student and tutor to cover effectively, and that if he needed or wanted to learn it, the subject was amply covered in any formal school of magical instruction.

Professor Sprout (Sprout. A teacher of plants named Sprout. That was almost a bad joke. Of course the Arithmancy teacher was named Vector(!)) Professor Sprout was a large woman with wild hair who was very serious about her plants. The class was fast paced, intensive, and fun. It was also dirty. Harry found it amusing that a part of him enjoyed that most of all.

After Herbology (and a quick shower) it was time for dinner. The meal was excellent as usual, the three friends dawdled over there deserts, joking and having a good time, when Harry was approached by three boys.

"Potter?"

"No, Stark. And you?"

"Draco Malfoy."

"Cool name. Family name or your parents fans of astronomy?"

"Family tradition on my mother's side. I wanted to talk to you about your place in Pureblood Society. I can help you Potter."

_Ooh ooh. One of those._ "My name is Harry Stark, has been since I was 5 years old. I'm not sure I qualify for 'Pureblood Society' seeing as I would be classified as a half-blood." He winked at Hermione. "I guess I should have been more careful choosing parents."

"True, you aren't a Pureblood, but your children will be, assuming of course you marry properly."

"Ok," said Harry. "Pull up a chair; tell me the advantages of being a Pureblood."
Draco looked startled, and then sat down. Neither boy notice the attention paid them by the Headmaster and their heads of house.

"Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle," said the pale boy carelessly, noticing where Harry was looking.

"Hey fellas, cop a squat. Let's brainstorm this thing." Draco Malfoy looked at him oddly.

"Purebloods are the superior faction of Magical Britain due to our breeding. We are superior in magic, superior in Quidditch, superior in business. It's all self evident."

"Wow." Harry was smiling. "That's impressive. How far back can you trace your magical lineage?"

"Over 500 years."

"That's a long time. Is that all branches or just the Paternal line?"

Draco was stumped by that question, he didn't know. "The Paternal line most certainly, my mother is from the Black family, an ancient house."

"Cool. So that put's your mother's line at a thousand years or so, but Paternal is what you knew off the top of your head, so that's the important line. Padma here has a demonstrated pedigree going back 5000 years in every branch. I guess that makes her superior to you, right?"

"No."

"But I thought that you were saying that Purebloods were superior? If that's true, then the longer a line runs, the more pure the line becomes. If your 500 years of purity makes you superior to anyone else, based on that alone then Padma having ten times as much purification must be superior to you, based on that alone. Q.E.D."

Draco didn't go red, but a pink tinge appeared in his pale cheeks.

"Ok, let's ignore the levels of blood purity for a moment. You said purebloods were more magical. Hermione? Show Draco what you were doing with your plate."

Hermione nodded. "Ok Harry" with a swish and flick of her wand, the plate rose from the tabletop and hovered for a second, then orbited around the group before settling back down to the tabletop before Harry.

Harry pushed the plate toward Draco. "Your turn." Draco stared at the plate for a second then glanced up at Hermione. "Hermione's a first year like us. She's a first generation Witch, first in her family."

"You mean mu… Muggle-born." Offered Goyle.

"No, I don't like the term 'Muggle. I mean why start insulting people right out of the gate? The proper term for the general population should be Normals or Mundanes. Perfectly descriptive without being insulting."

"Are you saying that wizards are abnormal?"

"Draco, there are more than 6 billion… sorry, I keep forgetting the Brit numbering system, 6 thousand million people on the planet, a very minor fraction of them are magic users. Yes. Wizards are abnormal, in that aspect. There's nothing wrong with the word, it doesn't mean inferior. Anyway,
can you do what Hermione can do?"

Draco pulled his wand. The plate quivered on the tabletop, rose about an inch, and then fell back down.

"From my point of view, magic has nothing to do with your breeding; it has to do with a lot of different things. Some people have a lot of natural talent, others study and practice and get through on old fashioned hard work. I'll let you in on a badly kept secret. The most powerful magic user on the Earth isn't a wizard. He's a Mundane who grew to adulthood with absolutely no magic, and after an accident discovered a kind of magic that allow him to heal himself, after years of study he has become the Sorcerer Supreme of Earth."

"That's impossible. My father says that Muggles are backward weaklings."

"Draco, that's silly. You've been here as long as I have, have you seen any stupid weaklings among the first generation witches and wizards? I haven't. I look around this place and I see people, some jerks, but mostly nice people, all of whom can use magic. This is great. As far as what your dad has to say, it could be that he's never really met all that many Mundanes, just ask him if he's ever heard of Stephen Strange, he's the most powerful magic user I mentioned before."

Draco was looking confused, and a little upset that his point wasn't being made. "Draco, guys. Hermione, Padma and I have been talking about forming a study group open to all the houses, would you guys like to join in?"

The three Slytherins were surprised at the invitation; they shared a glance before Draco spoke. "That might be fun. We would have to see how it fits with our schedules…"

"I'll drop you a note when we have the times firmed up." Harry promised and watched smiling as the trio moved away.

"Why did you do that Harry?"

"What better way to subvert a bigot Padma? It's hard to hate someone when they help you with your homework. When you find out she is at least as smart as you are, actually bathes and looks pretty cute when she chews on the nib of her quill…"

Padma blushed and pulled the quill from her mouth.

"Smooth Stark."

"Thank you Hermione. No I'm serious. He came over here convinced that you two weren't really human, Padma because she isn't white, Hermione because she is a first generation witch, I twisted his little beliefs right back at him, with his own arguments. If he joins us, he'll either have to redefine his beliefs or be the biggest hypocrite since ever."

"Why didn't you use yourself as an example?"

"Because he was trying to recruit me. I was letting him know I hang with my friends." He smiled at them. "You guys, Susan and Hannah, Neville, you're the important ones to me." He frowned for a moment.

"What's wrong Harry?" Hermione asked.

"I was just thinking. It's Neville and me, and you four girls. That's not right. Oh well, only one thing for it."
"What's that Harry?"

"We've got to find more girls. Hey Padma, your sister's kinda cute…"

Hermione looked to Padma.

"He thinks he's funny."

"Yes he does. He wants to do the Twins joke."

"There's only one solution for this." Hermione admitted sadly.

"Yes. We will have to hurt him, badly."

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Hermione woke slowly. Saturday morning. Her birthday. She wasn't surprised at all that she was feeling a little down. This was her first birthday away from her parents. She rose and made her way to the (thankfully empty) bath, and treated herself to a long hot shower. Returning to her room, she dressed, then dug out this week's letter from her parents, along with the small package labeled "Happy Birthday!" Not having access to any of the normal Wizarding postal facilities, and not having the time to deal with an owl, the Grangers had pre-written a letter for each Saturday until the Christmas Hols, and would write letters weekly to send on return flights with the school owls that Hermione used to send news home, still for a girl used to having Mum and Daddy around all the time, it was very hard to get used to being away from them.

Reading the letter first, she read her parents words of love and understanding. She then opened the small package and found a lovely golden heart on a chain. Her mother always knew what jewelry she liked. Hermione quickly fastened it around her neck. She then made her bed and straightened her room, then descended the stairs to the common room.

Would her friends know it was her birthday? There had been a discussion at the beginning of the term about dates of birth to determine who was the oldest. Hermione was the first to turn twelve. It was time to offer the wisdom of her years to the children. She smiled to herself.

When she entered the common room she heard the strangest sentences said to her in her entire 12 years of life:

"Yarr! Avast there Cap'in Granger! Heave yer self o'er here to receive your booty! Yarr!"

Sitting at one of the tables with several wrapped packages were Harry and Padma. The pair was dressed in outlandish outfits. White shirts with puffy sleeves, eye patches and black tricorn hats with skull and crossbones on them.

"What are you loonies doing?"

"Yarr! Ye wound us Cap'in" said Padma.

"Yarr! Here we be, yer loyal crew, with offering of booty to celebrate yer birth, and ye be callin' us loonies? Cut to the quick we are. Yarr!" Explained Harry helpfully.

"What is all this?"

"Yarr! This, Cap'in, be International Talk Like a Pirate Day, so Bo' sun Padma and I figer, why not celebrate the Cap'in's birthday as Pirates? Yarr!"
The corners of Hermione's mouth twitched into a smile. "Alright then. Hand over me booty! Arrr!"

"Not 'Arrr! Yarrr!"

"Whatever. Presents. Now."

The largest of the boxes had her very own pirates outfit, shirt, eye patch, and hat. From Padma she received a scarf that she immediately tied around her neck.

"No Cap'in, that there scarf goes on yer' head!" Padma took the scarf from her and placed it on Hermione's head to hold her hair back out of the way.

From Harry she received a small stuffed parrot to go on her shoulder as part of the pirates theme and a pair of gold hoop earrings.

During the silliness of their dressing up and their gifts Hermione's mood immediately lightened. The Pirate trio made their way to the Great Hall for breakfast, just being kids, calling "Yarr!" every few meters. They found their seats in the Great Hall and enjoyed their breakfasts. The Weasley Twins third years from Gryffindor house actually came over to discover what they were doing and why, they like the idea so much that they too were soon in eye patches proclaiming "Yarr!" to everyone in sight.

Harry and Padma kept it up all day and into the evening. Many if not most of the first years joined in at some point during the day. Several joined them on the lake for mock battles with the giant Squid. Perhaps most disturbing of all was when Dumbledore was spotted wearing a lavender eye patch and holding a faux hook in his hand. Who knew the Headmaster would be a fan? Finally at 10 pm Hermione was almost too tired to keep her eyes open. She stood and pulled Padma into a hug.

"Thank you." She then leaned down to kiss Harry on the cheek. "You made my birthday."

With that she headed up the stairs to her room.

"Well done Bo' sun."

"Thank you Harry. Anyone could see she was getting more and more depressed about her first birthday away from her parents."

"Yeah, but you're the one who suggested we do something silly enough to shock her out if it."

She threw a pillow at him. "Like I had any idea that a 'Talk like Pirates Day' existed, oh fount of useless information."

"Ok, so we're both heroes. Yay us!"

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The Halloween Feast was in full swing. Thousands of live bats fluttered from the walls making the candles in the pumpkins stutter. The food appeared suddenly on the golden plates, as it had at the start-of-term banquet. The Hall fell into a sudden hush as Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore's chair, slumped against the table, and gasped, "Troll — in the dungeons — thought you ought to know."

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

There was pandemonium throughout the Hall. It took several cannon blasts from Professor
Dumbledore’s wand to bring silence.

"Prefects," he rumbled, "lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

At the Ravenclaw table, Penelope Clearwater performed a quick headcount. The result terrified her. She rushed to the Head Table.

"Professor Flitwick, I'm short three first years. Granger, Patil and Stark."

The diminutive professor nodded. "Escort the rest of the house to the dormitories Miss Clearwater. I will find our lost lambs."

Flitwick made his way to Minerva McGonagall. "Min, three of my first years are missing, late for the feast it seems. If I recall they were working on an astronomy project."

"Albus, we’ve got three missing Ravenclaws. Filius and I were going looking for them."

"Everyone else lets go looking for this Troll. Severus, keep an eye on Quirrell."

The Ravenclaw Trio were heading to the Great Hall from the Astronomy Tower. "I told you that you had the stars in Orion's belt mislabeled."

"Yes Hermione. Thank you Hermione." Harry sing songed. He lived for the day she was wrong. He suspected it might be a long wait.

"I'm amazed he labeled the Horsehead Nebula as the Orion Nebula and vice versa."

"It's the cross I bear hanging out with two hypercompetitive geniuses. Lucky me. I still don't see why we can't use a planetarium projector and do this stuff during the day instead of the dark of night missing dinner."

"Poor baby." Hermione mocked happily.

"Can you smell something?" Padma stopped in her tracks.

Harry sniffed and a foul stench reached his nostrils, a mixture of old socks and a summer time public toilet that no one seems to clean.

And then they heard it — grunting, and the shuffling footfalls of gargantuan feet. Padma pointed — at the end of the passageway, something enormous was shuffling toward them. They shrank into the shadows and watched as it emerged into a patch of moonlight.

It was a ghastly sight. 4 meters tall, its skin was dull, granite gray, its great lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched on top like a coconut. It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horns feet. The smell coming from it was unbelievable. It was holding a huge wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.

"What is that?" Hermione gasped.

"A mountain troll. They're vicious." Padma said.

The troll stopped when it spotted them. It wiggled its long ears, as if making up its tiny mind, then slouched slowly toward them.
"Back the way we came," Harry muttered. "We can out run it."

Turning they saw that the moving staircase was beginning its latest move. They were trapped.

They backed up to the wall. "Stay behind me!" Harry said. He took four paces toward the Troll. "Techsuit. Translation suite."

The disembodied voice of the Techsuit whispered in his ear. "Translation Suite online. Language?"

"European Mountain Troll."

There was a short pause, the Techsuit whispered. "Language module online. Proceed."

"Hello friend Troll." Harry said, pausing so that the Techsuit could render his words into the grunts and squawks of the Trollish language. "How might we help you tonight?"

The huge creature stopped. "Gorlog Hungry."

"If you will follow me Friend Gorlog, I will take you to our food."

"No. Gorlog want meat. You meat. Gorlog eat!"

"Friend Gorlog, if you attack, I will kill you. Come with me, eat of our food, we can be friends."

The troll began its slow shamble toward them.

"Crap. Techsuit, full defensive measures, remove fatality interlocks." The tentacles exited his robes, targeting the Troll.

"Target analysis complete. Techsuit weapons suite is not capable of termination of target. Probability of disabling target twenty percent."

The girls shrieked as the troll got closer. "Techsuit, Engage target."

All four weapons pods went to work. Repeated pellets of the blinding agent hit the troll in the eyes, it only served to infuriate the creature. The tazer leads rebounded off the rock hard skin, the Pulse laser couldn't penetrate. And the repulser opened small cuts.

"Crap!" Harry said to no one. Techsuit backup target specs to upgrade file. Techsuit. Release Limiters."

A silver sheath fell from each of Harry's forearms. "Ladies, turn your back to me, no matter what you hear, do not turn around until I tell you to. Please, just do it."

"Techsuit. If chaos magic attack does not stop target, self attack, destroy target using power pack discharge."

"Understood: Self attack target if Chaos Magic attack fails."

The troll towered over Harry, raising it's club.

With a gesture Harry released the sum of his Chaos magic. It poured out of him via both arms and impacted the troll square in the chest with a deafening SQUARK!

After a few seconds of silence Hermione and Padma shared a look from where they huddled and turned around to see what was happening. It took but a glance for both of them to begin screaming.
A/N The last: Ok, I know that the International talk like a Pirate Day didn't actually start until 1995, but it was too cute to pass up, so sue me. Besides, couldn't you just picture them doing it?
Harry Potter and the Invincible TechnoMage Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

A/N: I do not own Harry Potter. Nor any of the Marvel Comics Characters mentioned herein. But you knew that.

A/N: I do not own Harry Potter. Nor any of the Marvel Comics Characters mentioned herein. But you knew that.

A/N2: I continue to be amazed at the attention this particular fic is getting. To answer a couple of reoccurring questions that keep coming up in reviews:

- No, this isn't a Harry/Hermione fic, and it won't be. To start with they are 11 years old. They are kids. If interest (yours and mine) continues with this story I intend it to go for the full seven years, ending the June before Harry turns 18. There will be dating, and partying, and perhaps a little sexual experimentation, but no life long bonds (at least in the scope of the story) Harry (and Hermione and Padma) will date (each other as well as others), will think he/she/they are in love, and be wrong. Remember the average High School romance lasts all of 6 weeks (according to an old issue of Psychology Today I've got laying around her somewhere.)

- Some people think I write Harry too mature. Maybe I do. Eleven was a very long time ago. I'm making him as immature as I can.

- Some feel Harry's too reliant on his Techsuit. Of course he is. He is a young kid with limited magic. He is advanced for his age, but not in comparison to adult wizards. He has been trained wandless magic (the transfiguration of the match stick to a needle wandlessly was what startled McGonagall, not the fact that he did it.) When threatened by Snape or the Troll, his first response is to use his weapons suite.

- The question has also been asked "who would give an 11 year old access to weapons like that?" Well considering the world he comes from, where kidnappings are common (even though they turn out to be exceedingly bad ideas bringing down on occasions the literal wrath of god(s) on the pointy little heads of the perps), perhaps a better question might be who would allow 11 year olds access to the general purpose weapons that allow their users to do everything from tickling to killing their opponents the level of the attack limited only by the Waver's intent. I am of course referring to wands.

- Yes, I made James Potter out to be the bad guy in the Snape situation. Remember the goal for Harry wasn't historical accuracy, but to defang Snape by shaming him into acting like an adult. Harry has no memories of James or Lilly, and isn't emotionally invested in them at all. As far as Harry is concerned (at least for now) he has a father, and his name is Tony Stark.

- At any rate, thanks for the interest and the reviews. Even if you hate this story thanks for reading.

Harry Potter and The Invincible TechnoMage
Chapter Four – That will Leave a mark.

May 9 1985:

Stark Industries Project Achilles facility

French Lick, Indiana.

"Well," said the large man with yellow eyes, his body covered in blue fur. "I can state categorically that this field is not a product of a mutation. There is no energy signature on file that matches this, and there is no indication that this field has any basis in biology. Not to mention the damned thing keeps burning out my sensors." He had made his observations while hanging upside down from the over head pipes. The small boy was no longer frightened, and seemed to find Hank McCoy, PhD. M. D. and several other initials to be quite amusing.

"Then what is it Hank?" Tony Stark was deliriously happy to have found a survivor, but to find him in an unassailable force field was disconcerting. Especially since said force field was far and beyond anything his technology was capable of producing. McCoy was one of the best in his field well versed in Avengers Secrecy protocols and less than an hour away when the call went out.

The large blue man did an extremely complex dismount from the pipe over the boy and his force field, which involved a wide swing, tucking into a double summersault, before landing before the boy, who clapped happily. McCoy bowed deeply to his appreciative audience of one before turning to Stark with a shrug, "Magic?"

This worried Stark. Magic made no sense; it couldn't be measured or quantified. He hated magic, though he had to admit it had its uses. "Should I call Wanda?"

The blue man shook his head. "This isn't Wanda's kind of magic. I'm not sure who would be best to call for this one, but when it comes to magic of whatever kind, you usually can't go wrong by calling Stephen Strange.

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Hermione and Padma screamed at the sight they found when they turned. The troll had been cut in half, everything above the waist was utterly gone, what remained of the below the waist portion of the Troll was laying before a kneeling Harry Stark. Both the girls choked off their panic and ran the few paces to their friend.

What they found was horrifying. The clothing on his upper body had completely disintegrated. His torso was covered in a dark gray silk like garment to which the tentacles were attached. The flesh on his arms was for lack of a better term cooked. Meaty portions were cracked open and oozing… grease? His face was horribly burned, his left eye swollen shut, his right, milky.

"Te… Techsuit. Phone. " The boy said between split lips, in painful gasps. A small plastic device fell to the floor. "Techs… Techsuit. Shutdown" The tentacles drooped to the floor lifelessly and the dark gray garment split along his breast bone to show his chest, which was just as horribly damaged as his arms and face.

"Can't see." He whispered, his breath coming in pants. "Hur… Hurt bad. Use phone outside wa… war… WARDS!" he slowly fell back. Padma caught him from the back and eased him to the ground. "push 2 until phone dials. Te… tell Jarvis, Ch… Ch… Chaos magic problem. Hurt… hurt… hurt bad."
Padma picked up the phone. "Do you know how to use this?"

"Yes." Hermione looked into her friend's eyes. "We've got to get him to the Hospital Wing. We've
got to find a teacher, to get Harry help and to let them know about that." She gestured at the troll's
remains. Then her eyes widened. "Oh my god."

"What?"

Hermione pointed beyond the remains of the troll to the huge hole punched through the side of the
castle.

"Miss Patil! Miss Granger! Mr. Stark!" the call came from behind them. They turned to see the
staircases realigning again, Professor Mcgonagall and Professor Flitwick were hurrying toward
them. "Are you alright? What was that horrible sound?"

"A troll had us trapped here Professor." Padma said, trying her hardest not to look at Harry and not
to be sick. "He… Harry saved us."

Minerva Mcgonagall looked at the remains of the troll and damage to the castle in shocked
amazement. "Mr. Stark did this? His Muggle weapons are capable of this?"

"Minerva!" Flitwick barked "We can worry about how he did it later, first we need to get him to
Poppy so she can keep him alive."

"Of course Filius, You levitate him to the Hospital Wing; I will bring your Ravenclaws along so that
Poppy can ensure that they are unharmed."

"Professor Mcgonagall. Harry gave us this." Hermione displayed the miniature telephone. "He
asked us to use it to contact his father and inform him of Harry's injuries. We have to go outside the
wards to use it."

"Surely that can wait Miss Granger. I can't see what his father could do in this situation."

"Harry said that his injuries were due to 'chaos magic'. He was in a lot of pain and going into shock.
Harry's done a lot of things that don't make any sense, but work anyway. Maybe his father does have
some insight into this situation. What could it hurt to tell him?" Padma asked.

Minerva Mcgonagall reflected for a moment, and then nodded. "Alright we'll go outside the wards
and try that Muggle device. Do you know how to use it Miss Granger?"

"Yes. It's just a smaller version of my parent's cellular phone. Harry seemed to think he'd get service
out here. I don't know how, but it can't hurt to try."

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It took almost 15 minutes to make their way out of the castle and down the path to the school gates.
The gates opened to Mcgonagall's touch.

"We are outside the wards now Miss Granger. You can try to use the Muggle device now."

Hermione nodded, wondering how she knew where the wards ended. She pushed the power button
on the keypad of the tiny phone and watched as it displayed its startup functions. After several
seconds the handset chirped and 'Satellite Signal Acquired' appeared on the screen. She pressed and
held the number two, releasing it when the tone changed. The display changed to 'Dialing' and she
raised the handset to her ear. She listened to the odd single tone ring sound she recognized from
American television and Movies. On the third ring, the line was answered on the other end.

"Harry?"

The instant recognition of the man on the other end that it was Harry's phone calling startled her for a second.

"No sir. I'm a class mate of Harry's named Hermione Granger. Harry asked me to call and ask for Mr. Jarvis."

"This is Edwin Jarvis Miss Granger, how can I help?"

"Harry's been hurt. He said to tell you it was a 'Chaos Magic' problem, and that he's badly hurt."

"I see. Could you hold on please?"

"Yes sir."

She looked to Padma and Professor McGonagall. "He asked me to hold on. I think he's getting someone who can tell us what to do."

"Amazing device. Instant communications. Where are you speaking too?"

"I don't know Professor. Somewhere in America. Harry lives in New York City, probably there."

"Amazing."

"Miss Granger?" Came the voice on the phone.

"Yes Sir?"

"I have located Miss Maximoff, and we are arranging transportation for her. Could you stay where you are with this phone line open for a few more minutes?"

"Yes Sir, but…"

"Please don't worry Miss Granger."

"What is it Hermione?"

"He said he's found someone named Maximov or something and is arranging transportation. Then he asked me to hang on some more."

There was a quiet pop, like someone opening a jar sealed at a higher pressure. Standing in front of the students and professor were two women.

The younger of the new pair was perhaps in her mid twenties, with dark red hair. She was dressed in Muggle clothing that emphasized her sheer femaleness. The other woman was clearly older than McGonagall, tall and white haired she held herself with a regal-ness that spoke of learning and not suffering fools gladly.

"Miss Granger?" asked the older of the pair.

"Yes ma'am?"

"May I use the telephone please?" The shaking girl handed over the handset. "Thank you. Jarvis?"
She said into the phone. "We have arrived. We will keep you appraised as to young Mr. Stark's condition." She smiled at something the man said. "Yes, I'm sure she is. Thank you." and she broke the connection.

"Why did Harry use chaos magic?" asked the younger woman, her speech had an odd inflection as if English was not her first language.

"Harry, Hermione and I were attacked by a Mountain Troll. Harry defended us." Explained Padma.

"He is in the Hospital wing?" Asked the older woman. Both girls nodded. "Wanda, this is where he is." Padma had the feeling that something passed between the pair. "Make haste, the wards shouldn't inconvenience you."

The younger woman disappeared with a pop.

"But you can't apparate into Hogwarts." Protested Hermione weakly.

"There are many kinds of magic Miss Granger, though Hogwarts won't teach you this. It is true that Wizarding Magic will not allow you to apparate into the grounds of Hogwarts. Several of the other types of magic have no problem with Wizarding wards at all. Introductions I think. You are Hermione Granger. That means you must be Padma Patil." Padma nodded. "I am Agatha Harkness. I am an alumnus of Hogwart, Hufflepuff class of 1680." She smiled. "And how are you Minerva? It has been a few years."

"I am well Aunt Agatha."

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Poppy Pomfrey was running every diagnostic she could think of. The boy was dying, that much was evident, but precisely how he had gotten so injured still eluded her, supposedly he had been attacked by a Troll, but his injuries didn't seem to have any relationship with any troll Poppy had ever heard of. He appeared to have been… cooked, from the inside out. Harry's body was shutting down, and there was nothing she could do about it. Every potion she tried failed to work. Every spell she cast to heal him seemed to work for a second, and then the injury regressed. It was as if his magic was actively fighting any repair attempted on his body.

She turned when she heard the pop of apparition. A statuesque young woman in Muggle clothing stood before her.

"I am here to help Harry Stark." She said simply.

Waving the woman to the dying boy was an automatic gesture on the Healer's part. If this stranger could help, great, perhaps Poppy would learn something new.

"This damage is due to exposure to Chaos Magic. I will try to pull the remaining Chaos from his body so that you can heal him."

"Who are you?" asked the Healer.

"I am Wanda Maximoff. It was by watching me that Harry discovered his access to Chaos Magic. His body is not ready to deal with the power he has access to." She stood over the boy, spread her arms and started to mouth the words of a chant silently. Sickly yellow tendrils rose from the boy's body to coalesce into a sphere of the same color. Her chanting went on for more than thirty minutes, the sphere of unhealthy energy continued to grow.
Hello little friend. The man wearing the red cape with gold trim "What kind of magic are you using here?" Stephen Strange activated the Eye of Agamotto. The All-seeing eye told him what he needed to know.

"Any luck Stephen?"

"Indeed Tony. Your little friend here is a wizard."

Stark's brow furrowed. "But he's no more than five years old, how could he possibly have learned this level of magic?"

"You misunderstand Tony. Little Harry here is a wizard. Wizards are a subset of humanity with a biological access to magic. They do need training in the use of their magic, but as children they often have bouts of what they call 'accidental magic'. This 'accidental magic' tends to be sporadic, uncontrolled and as the name indicated accidental."

"This is sporadic? This is uncontrolled?" Stark gestured toward the force field surrounding the boy.

"Like any natural ability, there are those gifted beyond what passes for normality. Little Harry here is the Michael Jordan of Wizards. He is expending enormous amounts of magic and doesn't seem to be tiring in the slightest. Amazing really."

"Can you break it?"

"I've had dealings with British Wizards before. They don't like me much, I'm afraid. This shouldn't be too difficult." Strange began to gesture with hand signs while calling on various demons and minor deities. Bands of energy leapt from his hands to the electric blue bubble that was the shield for young Harry Potter.

Stark stepped back to watch. None of this made the slightest bit of sense. Which of course was only one of the reasons he hated magic in all its forms. Strange kept at his assault for another 15 minutes until the shield dissolved to nothing.

"Thank you Stephen. I've been terrified that we would lose this youngster at well." The waiting medical team rushed to the boy to bundle him away for medical attention. "I'm surprised it took so long."

"I was trying to break the shield without injuring the boy inside."

"Well it worked. Well done."

"I didn't do anything. I tried but couldn't make a dent." Earth's Sorcerer Supreme looked a tad embarrassed. "The shield dissolved when he fell asleep."

The four women had made their way back to the castle. Agatha Harkness found herself under a
barrage of questions from the bushie haired young girl. Her Indian friend did not ask questions of her own, but listened intently to the answers Agatha provided. It pleased her to no end that Harry had found friends such as this pair.

"Aunt Agatha, why did you come here? You know what the Ministry will do."

"I know what the Ministry will try to do Minerva. They might be a bit surprised. Why did I come? My favorite student in most of a century needed my help. You would do the same Minerva. The teacher is strong in our line, always has been."

They approached the Great Hall and Dumbledore's voice rang out, there was a fury in that voice that neither of the first year girls has ever heard before, and one Minerva had heard only rarely.

"You've gone too far Tom. The troll you let loose in the castle had hurt one of my students!"

They were now in a position to see into the Great Hall, where Dumbledore was dueling with Quirinus Quirrell. Snape was on the floor, stunned, and Quirrell was facing away from the Headmaster, his turban removed and his head at an odd angle. Where there the back of Quirrell's head should have been, there was a face, the most horrifying face either of the girls had ever seen. Chalk white with glaring red eyes and snake like slits for nostrils, it mocked Dumbledore.

"Hurt him Albus? I intend for young Mr. Potter to die, slowly and painfully for what he had done to me. Perhaps I will kill those he cares for in front of him to prolong his suffering. Look at me! Reduced to vapor and memory, I only have form for as long as I possess another. Once I have the Stone you will never be able to stop me old man!"

Dumbledore never answered; rather he began a chain of charms and hexes that flew at the possessed DADA professor at blinding speed. Every single spell was dodged, deflected or diffused.

"Idiot." Murmured Agatha Harkness. "There's only one way to deal with a possession." The older woman made a few gestures and a black band of magic leapt from her body and impacted on Quirrell's body, where it pushed a hazy black mist from the professor's head. Quirrell dropped like a puppet with its strings cut. The haze hung motionless in the air for a moment before rocketing straight up with a horrible wail.

Dumbledore raged at the aged woman "What did you do?"

"The only thing that could be done. You had already killed the host. She gestured toward Quirrell's body. "The only thing that will defeat a possessed corpse is to expel the possessor. You were wasting time and energy."

"You shouldn't even be here. You were banished for all time!"

"No Dumbledore, the old fools tried to banish me. I left of my own free will, and I return the same way, to see to an ill student. Is that a problem?"

"I will be calling the Aurors to deal with you."

The woman shrugged. "They are your Aurors, if you don't care what happens to them, why should I?" She peered into his eyes for a moment. "You asked Minerva to contact me, and get angry when I appear? Does your hypocrisy know no bounds Albus? You were much easier to deal with when you were younger. Back then you didn't let things that happened before you were born and that you do not understand inspire you to righteous indignation toward one of your teachers."

Dumbledore paled. No one had made it past his occlumency shield for more than a century, and this
woman did it without his even noticing.

"You know of course any attack against me will lose you Harry for all time."

"If he knew about it." Hissed the wizard.

"Threats Albus? And in front of so many witnesses." She smiled ruefully. "Call your Aurors if you must, I am going to the Hospital wing to see young Mr. Stark. I believe these young women should be looked at as well; it has been a rather stressful night for a pair of first years. Come along ladies."

Padma and Hermione shared a glance between themselves, then in succession the faces of their Headmaster, Deputy Headmistress, and Agatha Harkness, then each other again. Padma shrugged and Hermione nodded. The pair followed the aged witch to the Hospital Wing. They wanted to see how Harry was doing.

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May 10 1985:

Stark Industries Project Achilles facility

French Lick, Indiana.

"Tony, I swear to God, I am going to fly to England and kill a woman."

"Calm down Pepper." Stark looked up from the estimates for rebuilding the control room. "What's wrong and who do you need to kill?"

"I tracked down little Harry's only surviving relative. Turns out she isn't a really a relative, she's the sister of the Uncle. No blood relation. I told her that Harry was alive and she said, and I quote "Drown the little bastard, he's always been nothing but trouble." And the bitch hung up on me.

"You've got to be kidding."

"I wish. Tony the child services are telling me that with no living relatives, he'll end up being sent to an orphanage. Do they actually still do that?"

Stark's brow furrowed. "Damn. He's no more than five years old. I can't let that happen."

Pepper Hogan, nee Potts blushed. Tony, he's such a sweet kid, I asked if I could adopt him. They told me that since Happy and I have divorced, I can't offer him a stable home." Tears formed in her eyes. "We can't let the little guy get lost in the system like that."

Stark thought for a moment. He had always taken care of his people. If someone was hurt or killed on the job, he had always taken care of the family…

"Pepper, get me Stewart, Myers, and Stuben out of Gotham City on the phone. They've handled both of Bruce Wayne's adoptions, Oliver Queen's as well. They'll handle this one too."

"Tony, they won't let me adopt."

"Not you Pep. I'm going to adopt him. But you're going to help me. He's going to need a mother figure."

Not for the first time Stark International's highest paid employee hugged her boss.
Wanda still stood over the boy, with her arms spread wide, chanting the incantation to remove the remnants of the Chaos Magic from his body. The yellow sphere of magic pulsed over the boy, as the last of the tendrils separated from his body.

"I need something made of metal to put this in." The redhead said, holding the beach ball sized sphere of magic suspended in the air with some effort. "Iron would be best."

Minerva McGonagall had been watching since she had followed her Aunt and students to the Hospital Wing five minutes before. She took a porcelain bedpan and transfigured it into an iron bucket and placed it on the ground next to the strange witch. The sphere of magic was carefully lowered into the bucket. The magic fused to the iron and the entire bucket glowed for a second.

"Your potions should work now, your healing charms as well."

"Thank you. I was terrified I was going to lose him." Poppy immediately poured the first vial of healing potions down the unconscious boy's throat.

Wanda collapsed into one of the chairs. "He should be alright Mistress Harkness."

"I don't understand." Hermione spoke up. "What happened? What magic doe he know, and why did it hurt him like that. I was never so frightened in my life."

"That was Chaos Magic. Harry knowing it is my fault I'm afraid." The redhead said. When it first manifested for me, I was practicing with it. Harry was watching me. It never occurred to anyone of us that he might be able to access that kind of magic before his body was capable of channeling it without destroying it's self. We almost lost him at 9 years old. His father developed the limiters that keep him from accessing the Chaos Magic. For this to happen he had to choose to disengage the limiters."

"He knew what would happen." Said Padma. "He dropped those silver things and told us to turn away."

"He did that to save your sight and to keep you from getting burned." Wanda shook her head sadly. "His immature use of the magic creates a lot of heat and light, as you can see from his body, more than enough to burn or blind someone close. I'm afraid we were not the best example for Harry. Sometimes I think he is too willing to sacrifice himself to protect others rather than run and lead others away."

"No!" Hermione almost shouted. "His first instinct was to run from the troll, he tried to lead us away. But the staircase moved and we were trapped. He did that to himself to protect us."

"I'm sorry; I wasn't trying to denigrate Harry. He's been my friend for more than 5 years. He's a wonderful boy."

"We were just up in the Astronomy tower working on a project. We were teasing him about mislabeling some stars and nebula, and then that troll showed up and now Harry's all hurt, a professor was possessed, and… "Padma started to cry. Hermione clung to her and started crying herself.

Minerva looked to Poppy who was still working on Harry. She nodded. Minerva reached into the cabinet next to the door to Poppy's office and removed a pair of vials.

"Ladies." The pair of girls looked up into the eyes of their transfiguration teacher, blinking away
tears. "This has been a rough night for the pair of you, and you've held up better than many witches twice your age, but it's catching up to you now. Drink these." She handed each of them one of the vials. "Those potions will help you sleep. Get into those beds. You'll still be here in the morning; Harry should be a bit better then."

Dutifully the pair climbed into the beds and drank the potions. They were asleep before they finished lowering the vials to the side tables.

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Harry Potter and The Invincible TechnoMage

Chapter Five – Fathers Day.

May 11 1985:

Orange County Child Services

French Lick, Indiana.

"Mr. Stark, the child is... well, different. We aren't really equipped to care for him."

In the corner of the room the tiny black haired boy sat quietly. There were blocks and crayons with paper on the table he sat at, but he most studiously avoided touching them. Tony really didn't understand that, in his entire life he had never seen a child so young sit so quietly. Outside the door to the office something happened, causing a loud noise that startled the boy, and once again the electric blue dome formed over him.

"He does that all the time." The woman said, Tony couldn't recall her name. She leaned forward conspiratorially. "I think he may be a mutant."

"May I speak with him?" Tony Stark asked, pushing all of his charm into the question. As usual, the woman reacted to his patented bachelor vibe and nodded.

Tony moved over to the small table where the boy sat, still quiet as a mouse. Collapsing his tall frame to fit in the tiny chair, he met the boy's gaze. Startled again, the boy looked away. What had his life been like to be this cowed at such a young age?

"Hello Harry. My name is Tony. I work at the place where your Aunt and Uncle got hurt."

A look of terror filled the boy's eyes. "I didn't do it. I didn't do anything."

"We know that Harry. It's ok that you're scared. When I heard about what happened I was scared, and I wasn't even there. I've called your Aunt in England."

Again the fear showed. "Aunt Marge?"

"Yes Harry. Your Aunt Marge told my assistant that she couldn't take you because she is too old to
"care for a young man like you."

"Aunt Marge doesn't like me. Nobody likes me because I'm bad. I try real hard, but I'm always bad."

"From what I've seen, you're a good boy Harry. As far as I can find out, you don't have any other relatives. Do you know of any?"

"No sir. My mum and dad died in a car crash. My Uncle said they were drunk."

What a horrible thing to say to a child. What kind of man had that bastard Dursley been in life anyway?

"I was wondering if you would like to live with me Harry?"

"With you? Yes Sir. I could do that. I'll work hard. I can make breakfast, and I can weed the garden and I can clean bathrooms. Uncle Vernon said I could start mowing the lawn this summer. I don't eat much sir, and I don't need much space."

"Harry, I'm not looking to hire a servant. I was asking if you would like to live with me. If you would like it, I would like to adopt you. You would be my little boy."

"Really?"

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The morning after the Troll incident, breakfast was served as usual. Albus Dumbledore was seated at the head table radiating peace and serenity in that way he did that calmed almost everyone in the room. He was well aware that Minerva and Filius were not among those calmed by him this morning, but the students were amazingly unaware of the details of the previous night's adventure.

Dumbledore's serenity was suddenly shattered when something, no two extremely powerful somethings crossed the wards. What ever they were, they were flying and moving at very high speed. He had barely risen from his seat when the doors leading to the Entry Hall slammed open.

"Dumbledore!"

The Headmaster turned to see three people standing at the doorway. An extremely tall blonde man, an ethereal blonde woman wearing nothing on her feet, and a man he recognized. A man who couldn't possibly be here without Dumbledore's specific invitation.

"Dumbledore, what the hell have you allowed to happen to my son?" The tall dark haired man strode to the head table to stand directly in front of the Headmaster. "You swore that this was the safest place in Britain, that nothing could happen to Harry as long as he was here, and you let a damned Mountain Troll into your school?"

Dumbledore's eyes drifted to the Hufflepuff table where Agatha Harkness was sitting, holding court as the most famous living Hufflepuff. She smiled and saluted him with her goblet.

"Mr. Stark, you are understandably upset, perhaps we should retire to my office where we can discuss this calmly."

"Your office? Are you insane man? My son almost dies because you can't do your job properly and you want me to go to your office? I'm going to see Harry."

"Mr. Stark, I assure you all is well…"
"All is well? I'm interested in how you decided that. You let a troll get, not on to the grounds, but inside the school it's self. My son was forced to defend him self, almost dying doing so. The only reason he is still alive is he presented a pair of classmates with the means of calling for help. You have yet to notify me of his status, I'm suspecting that the Grangers and the Patils also have yet to be notified of the dangers their children found themselves in. Harry still hasn't wakened, and you're assuring me all is well?"

Dumbledore was taken aback at the man's vitriol. Did he not know to whom he was speaking? Giving no outward sign he concentrated and applied a calming compulsion to the man. Tony Stark's eyes dilated for a second and he smiled, then his brow furrowed, and the fire returned to his eyes. He leaned over the table, putting himself inches from the Headmaster's face.

"Old man, you know the circles I deal with. You made that clear when you decided to visit us this summer. I am a technologist. I build things. My friends encounter cowards who try to control the minds of others all the time. Try to control my thoughts again and I will rip your mind from your body. If I ever find out you used your mind control on my son, and not a single stone of this lovely castle will be left standing. Do I make myself clear?"

"What I do if for the greater good Mr. Stark." Did this Muggle really think Dumbledore would be frightened by his threats? Though his unexplained ability to throw off a compulsion did give the Headmaster pause.

"'The Greater Good'? That has been the refuge of bullies since time began old man. Everyone believes what he does is right or justified. What makes you special?" The man stood back "I want to see my son."

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Dumbledore watched as Filius led the elder Stark out of the Great Hall on his way to the Hospital Wing. He turned his attention to the Muggle's two companions.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave the castle. You have no family here and are not allowed to stay."

The broad shouldered man smiled down at Dumbledore. "I am Merlyn's representative in this reality little wizard. My mission is to justice, not your nebulous 'greater good'. You lack the power to remove me, as your amusing wards told you when we arrived. Normally I wouldn't have anything to do with your kind, as Merlyn advised, but this is a favor for a trusted friend. We will be staying until Mr. Stark is ready to leave."

"Merlyn really doesn't like you or what your people have been doing with his heritage" the bare footed woman said. "Now that I've met you, I can understand why the land here is so unhappy."

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At the Hufflepuff table, Agatha Harkness was surrounded by delighted 'puffs. The sheer glee of having the acknowledged 'most powerful witch in the world' turn out to be a Hufflepuff was only slightly dimmed by the knowledge that she was banished from Britain for life and was liable to be arrested at any time… Though any Aurors who attempted to make such an arrest on Hogwarts grounds might suddenly discover they lived in interesting times and that was before Mistress Harkness (as she let the 'puffs know she preferred to be called) cast a spell. Not to mention that finding Aurors to make that arrest might be chancy given the number of 'puffs in the service.

Those who claimed that the badger house was a dumping ground for near squibs and dullards could
choke on it.
"Mistress Harkness?" Shy fourth year Cedric Diggory spoke up. "Since we heard you were here, we looked you up in the house records. Those records tell us that you didn't finish your seventh year due to being banished." He blushed. "The records do not record what you were banished for. Is it too rude to ask what it was you did?"

"Never shy away from asking questions young Badger." Agatha smiled at the blushing boy. "If I view your question as being too personal or too forward I will not answer it. I have been a teacher for a very long time, I live for questions."

"Why the old fools attempted to banish me and why they still pretend that they could is actually a story that is both amusing and sad. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

There was a chorus of affirmatives.

"During my seventh year there was a Dark Lord on the rise. Do any of you know of Dark Lord Derkholm?"

"Derkholm was an especially nasty Dark Lord who reigned from 1672 through 1680. He was noted for his use of Magic Stealing rituals on young girls." Supplied Penelope Clearwater. She had come from the Ravenclaw table as soon as she realized that there might be something to learn.

"Very good Miss?"

"Penelope Clearwater ma'am."

"You have an excellent grasp of recent history Miss Clearwater." She smiled when she saw the looks on their faces. "Recent for me at any rate."

"At any rate, Derkholm's forces captured me and 12 other girls on a Hogsmeade trip. We were added to the four girls he already had. Derkholm did his rituals in groups of seven. I was selected for the second set of seven that afternoon. Number 6 actually. Doing the ritual 12 times in a row was evidently somewhat intoxicating. He inverted the transfer rune on the cluster."

"So instead of your magic going to him, his went to you?"

"Quite right Mr. Diggory. His magic, his life, and the magic he had stolen from 236 other girls. In one fell swoop, I became the most powerful witch in the world. The old fools of the Wizengamot decided that since I had the power of a Dark Wizard, I must be dark. They ordered my death."

"I didn't feel the need to cooperate, so I defended myself. 23 Aurors later, the Wizengamot decided that perhaps I shouldn't be killed. I believe my standing in their chamber threatening to flay the skin from all their bodies may have had something to do with that decision. After I left they decided to banish me for life. I ignored that as well, until my betrothed broke it off with me. That was when I left for the Massachusetts colony, vowing never to return."

"But Mistress Harkness. What if someone calls the Aurors?" asked Susan Bones making a mental note to ask her Auntie Amelia about this injustice.

"As I told your headmaster last night, if who ever sends them after me doesn't care about their Aurors, why should I?"

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Harry hurt. He hurt all over his body. It was better than his last memory though. And he was warm. That was good. His eyes hurt too. Could magic cure blindness? He couldn't recall Mistress Harkness having anything to say on the subject. But then it wasn't really likely to have come up.

There was a light murmur of conversation in the room. He girded himself and opened his eyes. He found his father looking down into his eyes.

"Dad?"

"Hey kid. What did I tell you about leading with your chin?"

"When did you get here?"

"Here in the infirmary? About three minutes ago. I've been in the castle about 20 minutes. I got into the UK about two hours after Agatha and Wanda got her. The delay was finding Brian and Meggan to help me find this place. Even with the GPS coordinates, I kept missing." He ruffled the boy's hair. "Wanda told me what you looked like last night. Madam Pomfrey is quite the healer. Think I could hire her away for the Avengers?"

"Jarvis might get jealous if you got someone else to patch people up."

"True enough. Your friends here have been telling me that you saved them from a huge troll."

Harry looked over to see Padma and Hermione both sitting in beds, eating from trays and smiling shyly at him. "I'm sorry Dad. I didn't mean to worry anyone. We tried to run, but we were trapped. Then I tried the weapons in my Techsuit, but all they did was make the troll mad."

"Did you archive the target specs in your upgrade file?"

"Yes. After the Techsuit didn't work, I really didn't have much choice. You've seen the specs on a troll. If it had been just me, I would have tried to dodge around him, but with three of us, someone was going to get hurt."

"And you decided, better you than them?"

"Yes sir." Harry couldn't meet his father's eyes.

"You did the right thing Harry. Would I prefer you didn't get hurt? Most certainly." He looked around to see if anyone was paying close attention to their conversation. "Am I surprised that you put your body between danger and your friends? No. Look at the example you've been given. Steve, Clint, Ben, Jennifer, Wanda, hell, even me. What do we do? You're a good kid Harry. You did the right thing."

"Thank you Dad. I'm not sure I believe it, but thank you."

"Are you still set on staying here?"

Harry nodded. "Yes sir. I like being with people like me."

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"Miss Maximoff?"

"Yes?" When Tony and Harry had started talking she had moved away to near the door of the infirmary. The man who approached her was tall with a hooked nose, dressed all in black.
"My name is Severus Snape. If you had a moment, I was hoping I could escort you to breakfast in the Great Hall, that we might discuss your work in Chaos Magic."

"I'm surprised Mr. Snape. I was under the impression that most wizards viewed my work on the theory of Chaos Magic as something just short of heresy."

"You are correct, and until last night I was one of them, but after seeing an example of the practical application last night…"

"Are you one of Harry's teachers?"

"I am. I teach Potions."

"Breakfast would be nice."

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May 15 1985:

Stark Estate

New York, New York

"And this is your room Harry." The rotund man showed him to a huge room, with a bed, bookcase, desk, dresser, and a lot of things. This room was bigger than the sitting room back at #4 Privet Drive.

"All this is for me?"

"Yes, this is your bedroom. When you're ready I'll show you around the rest of the family rooms."

"There's more? Wow."

"Yes Harry the house is quite large. Would you like help unpacking?"

"Oh, no Mr. Jarvis, I can do it." The small boy opened the single very cheap suitcase he had brought with him. From the case he removed a pair of jeans and two shirts, those three items, like the shirt and pants he was wearing, appeared to be brand new. "I love these clothes." The little boy murmured to him self.

"It's just 'Jarvis' Harry. Please no one calls me Mr. You love those outfits do you?"

"Oh, yes sir. They are the first new clothes I can remember. I got them special for the trip. Uncle Vernon didn't want me to come, but there wasn't anyone to take care of me for six weeks. So I got to come." The boy's eyes so bright suddenly dimmed "Then the accident happened."

Three shirts and two pair of pants were the first new clothes he could remember? "Well Harry, that's behind you. Mr. Stark wants you to stay with us from now on." Edwin Jarvis was wishing he could have met this 'Vernon Dursley' while he was alive. Perhaps a short lesson in how bullies were dealt with in Brooklyn would have straightened the man out. "It seems to me that you could use a few more outfits. Perhaps tomorrow we can go shopping for a few things."

"I don't want to be a burden Sir. Don't worry about me."

"Harry, you could never be a burden."
"You're sure?"

"Yes Dad. I need to stay here. I need to be with others like me."

"Alright kiddo. You cook yourself again, and your butt will be back in New York before you can say Brighton Beach. Jarvis is likely to kill me as it is."

"Make sure you tell Jarvis I'm ok Dad."

"He knows. Brian, thank you for your help, I'll be hitching a ride back to London with Agatha and Wanda. Megan, as usual it has been a treat to see you."

"Any time Tony. Take care of yourself Harry."

"Thank you Mr. Braddock."

"Take care young Harry."

"And you Mistress Harkness. Thank you for coming."

Harry watched as his father and the two witches disappeared, while Brian and Megan flew off. He watched until the fliers were too far away to make out. He then turned and reentered the castle. He had some Herbology homework to finish.

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May 27 1985:

Stark Estate

New York, New York

Harry had lost track of time. The picture book about dragons and trolls and goblins had taken hold of his imagination and he had lost himself in imagining a world where such things existed. Jarvis had knocked on his door reminding him that there were visitors and that dinner would be in half an hour. He came barreling around a corner and ran full bore into someone very large, very hard, and very... Orange?

"Watch it there sport." A very deep gravelly voice came from the huge... person.

Harry stared up at the person. "Are you a rock?"

The huge person laughed a deep friendly sounding laugh. "My skin is sort of like a rock, but I'm a man. My name is Ben. You must be Harry."

"Yes sir. Could I touch you?"

The man laughed again. He extended his hand. Harry wrapped both his hand around the massive orange index finger. "Wow! That is so amazing!"

"Come on Harry; let's find my nephew, Franklin."

"Yes Sir. Have you always been like this?"
"No, we were trying to go the moon, we didn't use the right shielding and we came back changed."

"We? Are there more orange people?"

"No, we all changed in different ways. My best friend is like a rubber band, his wife can turn invisible, and her brother can turn into fire and fly."

"That is so cool. You are all so lucky!" He gestured to himself. "This is all I am."

The big man laughed again. "Sometimes it's good to be just you Harry. You'll grow into yourself given time."

A small blond boy ran up. "Unca Ben! Unca Johnny's telling people that purple pants story about you."

"Oh he is is he?" the large orange man rushed into the room.

"Hi." Said the blond boy. "I'm Franklin. Are you Harry?"

"Yeah. Ben is your Uncle?"

"Yeah, all my life."

"You are so lucky. He's the coolest uncle in the world. All mine did was yell at me, he could turn colors too, but I think that was mostly being mad."

"Come on. When ever Unca Johnny tells the purple pants story, Unca Ben ends up grabbing him and holding him under water until his fire goes out. That's really funny!"

"Your other uncle turns into fire? Man, you are so lucky."

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Stuart Granger parked the car and got out. His wife Kristine came to his side.

"I always wanted to take you here, but the costs are astronomical."

"Don't worry about that Stuart, we're here now. I can't believe we got an invitation from Tony Stark no less. Do you think he might have Iron Man here?"

"It's Hermione that's the Super Hero fan Kris, not you. I just find myself wondering what he wants."

At the reception desk, Stuart mentioned the Stark party, and the pair was escorted back to a private room.

"Ah, the Grangers. Welcome. I'm Tony Stark." He gave then that smile known world wide. "This is Chandrahhas Patil and his wife Dhanyata. Mr, Mrs Patil these are the Grangers, Stuart and Kristine. I can see you all have questions. You're asking yourself why has he called us here."

"It turns out that we have something in common. Our children are all students at Hogwarts."

The Patils immediately became very alert. "You're a wizard?"

"No. My adopted son is however, just like the Granger's daughter Hermione."

The Patils and the Grangers stared at him expectantly. "We have things to discuss, but I think it
would be more comfortable to do so over our meal, without the wait staff in attendance."

Surrendering to this, the group looked to their menus and ordered. They made small talk while their meal was prepared and served. As soon as the wine was poured the servers left and the room was sealed.

"Excuse me one moment." Tony opened his briefcase and removed a small object, he twisted it and placed it on another table. "Now we're safe from ease droppers. Last night our children, my son Harry, the Patil's Padma, and the Granger's Hermione were going to dinner from the castle's Astronomy tower when they were confronted by a Mountain Troll." The Patils gasped. "Stuart, Kristine, I don't blame you for not knowing, I had to look it up myself when I found out. A mountain troll is a nasty creature that averages four meters tall, weighing in at around 600 kilos. They are aggressive and will kill most people they come across."

"From what I've been told, the kids attempted to escape, but evidently the stair cases move and they were trapped with the troll attacking. If you're aware of my work, then it won't surprise you that my son has some technological advantages that other students at Hogwarts do not. He used his weapons, but couldn't do more than annoy the troll."

Stark went on to explain what Harry had done, and the level of injury he had sustained in doing so. The Grangers seemed to assume that Harry was just an above average magic user based on Letters sent by Hermione. The Patils were startled at the admission that Harry had managed to use Chaos magic, even if he did so in a self destructive way.

"What concerns me is that the school made no effort to inform me, and the headmaster was angered when I presumed to appear at the castle. That was when I asked myself if either of Harry's friends parents had been informed of the situation they had found themselves in."

Both sets of parents were surprised by the revelation of their children's adventure, and said so.

"I thought so. I have an idea that will facilitate communication between our children and ourselves. With your permission I would like to supply both Padma and Hermione with technology that will allow them to communicate almost instantly with you. Given my choice I would be pulling my son out of that mad house, Harry on the other hand has a deep need to prove himself to those like himself. From the way they were together at Hogwarts, it's a safe bet to me that the three of them will remain together at least for a while, so if the girls have a way to talk to you, and you have a way to talk to me, that triples the chance that I will hear what my wayward child is up to."

"I do not understand." Chandrahhas Patil said. "Ours is a magical household, from everything I know of Muggle technology, it will not work in such an environment. We do use Muggle technology in our business, but we cannot at home."

"Ah, an unexploited market... you make the businessman in me salivate. Having Harry around has necessitated my learning to develop technology that works with the magic instead of trying to make it work in spite of it. I will need to tune the kids modules to them, but your home units will work fine with the ambient level of magic you generate."

"Will the children's devices give them any advantages in their studies?" asked Kristine Granger.

Doubtful, unless Hermione hacks into the system to add the capabilities. Harry could do it if he wanted, but tells me doing it the normal way is easier."

The discussion went on for another hour. In the end both families agreed, and were indeed looking forward to the new method of communicating with their children. It was agreed that the Starks would
visit both families when the children returned to London for the Christmas Holidays.

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July 20 1985:

Stark International Corporate Day Care

NYC New York.

"Come On Harry, Grab your things."

"Hi Pepper! Just a sec." Pepper Hogan watched the boy say goodbye to his playmates, put away the truck he had been playing with, and rushed over to the square shelf labeled with his name before running to meet her.

"How was your day Harry? Learn anything new?"

"Miss Allison says I'm ready for school in September. We spent about an hour learning to write our names in joined together writing. Little r's are hard. See?" He handed her several pieces of paper.

"I remember that. I was lucky; I only had one r in my name. You've got three." She regarded the pages like they were vitally important, which of course they were. "This is quite good Harry. Are you looking forward to school?"

"Oh yes. I'm tired of being a little boy. I want to be big."

They arrived at the executive elevator. Pepper waited while Harry pushed the call button. This was a routine they had worked out over the last few of weeks; Harry was in charge of the elevator buttons. The elevator arrived and they entered together. Harry stretched on his tip toes but he couldn't quite reach the button for the 84th floor. Pepper lifted him up, one hand under each arm so that he could reach.

"I seem to recall someone has a birthday coming up." Pepper said as the elevator began its rise to Tony's office level. "Any ideas for what I might get a certain young man?"

"Whose? Is it Franklin's birthday?"
The question was pure Harry, completely honest. He had no idea when his birthday was. "Yours silly. You're going to be five. So, what would you like for your birthday?"

"I've got everything I've ever wanted Pepper. There is only one thing I'm wishing for, but if I tell what it is, the wish won't come true."

"Sometimes wishes need a little help Harry. You can tell me what you're wishing for. I'll try to help."

Harry stood staring at the numbers flashing above the sliding door of the elevator, his little mouth set in a line as he reached a decision. He would trust her. "If I could have anything, I wish I could call Tony Daddy."

The door slid open and Harry exited the elevator. Pepper just watched as he left unable to move, silent tears running down her cheeks. The door started to close, but she pressed the open door button and rushed to the Ladies washroom to repair her face. It took almost a quarter hour to calm down enough to return to her desk. Harry was at the table he used to read and play at while waiting for Tony to be ready to go home. Pepper ruffled his hair as she walked by and entered the executive office of Tony Stark.

Tony was at his desk, facing him was his long time friend and former pilot James "Rhodey" Rhodes. Tony looked up from the conversation and noticed Pepper had come into the room.

"How's our boy?" The billionaire asked.

"More than ready to start school. Miss Allison was teaching him to write his name in cursive. He tells me that the small r's are hard." She handed over the evidence of the difficulty of cursive lowercase r's.

"Bet he did it perfectly because it was hard." Tony Stark, multibillionaire, international industrialist, superhero wondered for the moment what file this paper would end up in, Harry's Achievements or Harry's Artwork. He had started both files a week after Harry had come to live with him, never imagining just how important the contents would become to him. "God I love that kid." He said to himself more than to anyone in the room.

Rhodey leaned back in his chair and laughed. "I never thought I'd live to see the day that the world's number one most eligible bachelor Tony Stark, old Love 'em and Leave 'em himself would fall for a kid."

"Says the man who put the Lear's controls into the hands of a four year old."

"Hey!" the tall black man said. "I've always liked kids; it's only you that all this is new for." He was still laughing at his friend. "By the way, did you ever figure out why the cockpit electronics crashed?"

Stark shook his head. That was still a mystery. Almost as soon as Harry laid hands on the controls, every single system crashed... Just like when his shield bubble was flaring and Hank's instruments were frying... Was it an effect of Harry's magic? Have to look at that.

"Tony, on the way up I asked Harry what he would like for his birthday. He didn't know when his birthday was."

"Yet another thing the Dursleys are going to pay for in Hell I guess. Did you find out what he wants?"

"He wants to call you Daddy."
The two men in the room were shocked into silence. "Are you serious?"

"God yes Tony. When he told me it was all I could do not to burst into tears in front of him. That is quite literally all he wants for his birthday."

"Tony, I swear to god, if you don't hurry up and adopt that kid, I'm going to truss your ass up, break both your legs, and drop you right back in that Guatemalan jungle I found you in." Again a smile creased the big man's face. "Seriously, you're good for him, and you NEED him. The last two months with him has you being more human than you've been in years."

"Pepper, get me Stewart, Myers, and Stuben on the phone. I think it's time they lit a fire under someone's ass over this."

The morning after his unwanted guests had left the castle, Albus Dumbledore was in a foul mood. He had never imagined that the Dursley's going on a business trip would have such an effect on his carefully laid plans. The sudden unwanted appearance of the elder Stark had demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that Dumbledore had nowhere near the amount of influence over young Harry that his plans required. The sheer power the boy had locked inside of his body was truly amazing. Surely this was a power the Dark Lord knew not, but was it enough? The confirmation that night that Voldemort was indeed still alive only made matters worse.

It was the arrogance of the Muggle that so irked the ancient wizard. The man came to Dumbledore's school and made demands? The man was lucky he wasn't now experiencing life as an invertebrate.

Of course the things had only gotten worse. An appearance at the lunch that same day by Amelia Bones.

Dumbledore looked up from his meal, to find the broad, square-jawed witch staring at him, her monocle magnifying her left eye in a most intimidating manner.

"We need to speak." She said.

"Amelia, lovely to see you. Could I offer you some lunch."

The witch leaned across the staff table until she was practically nose to nose with him. "Albus, unless you would like a loud discussion with an absolute likelihood of your staff and students hearing me call you a bloody fool here in front of the entire school, we should go to your office. Right now."

Two minutes later the pair were in the Headmasters office.

"What is this about Amelia?"

"Why did I have to wait until I got an owl from my niece to find out that you had a troll attack a student INSIDE the castle?"

"I'm not sure how that would come under your brief Amelia; I assure you that Hogwarts is the safest place in…"

"Safest place is it? I must have missed the rash of Troll attacks that occurred all over the country that would allow you to make that claim. As for how your incident comes under my brief, the attack was INSIDE your bloody castle Albus. The only sign of damage to the castle walls is where young Mr. Stark blew a hole in the wall on the fourth floor. I had my Aurors do a complete sweep of the
castle. What does this mean? It means someone let the troll in. That is a crime."

"Amelia, I..."

"Now I hear that your Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor is dead, and that witnesses saw you fighting his animated corpse until all people in the universe Agatha Harkness herself banished the possessing spirit. How is it that none of this was reported to me Albus? At very least that someone DIED. How did he die Albus? Who or what possessed him? What was someone under a lifetime banishment order doing here in your school?"

The bloody woman wouldn't let him get a word in edgewise. "Amelia, you don't understand..."

"Now I hear that you have announced to the school that there is something on the third floor that will kill them. What dangerous thing do you have on the third floor Albus? Why isn't something dangerous enough to need a warning on my list of things to be aware of? What is something that dangerous doing in the school my niece attends? You and I are going to have a conversation now, and you are going to answer each and every one of my questions, without your normal evasions. If when we are done, if I'm still not satisfied, then you and I will be returning to Auror Headquarters for an official interview."

It had taken almost three hours to satisfy all of her questions; even then Amelia had threatened frequent and unannounced visits to check up on things. All of this disruption could be laid at the feet of Harry Potter being a free agent. The boy needed guidance. He needed to be controlled.

Dumbledore had to exert control over the boy, plain and simple. A good first step might be to accelerate the acclimation to the Wizarding world. If the boy could be convinced to spend his Christmas Holiday at a trustworthy pureblood family... The Weasley's perhaps, he would start to feel the proper 'obligation' toward Wizarding culture... Perhaps the beginning of a romantic relationship with the youngest Weasley? He was well aware of the crush the girl had for the boy who lived... Perhaps...

Dumbledore crossed to his offices fireplace and threw a pinch of powder into the hearth. "Molly Weasley!"

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Harry leaned against the exterior wall of the castle, unable to catch his breath. The potions and charms that Madam Pomfrey had used to rebuild his body had regenerated the muscles and ligaments, strengthened the bones and generally knitted him back together from the damage he had done himself, but the restored flesh had no tone. It had taken most of a day to learn to walk again, and now a week later he was still weak as a kitten.

"Harry? What are you doing to yourself?"

"I'm just out of shape Padma. Same as I told Hermione yesterday."

"But why are you driving yourself so hard Harry?"

"Christmas is coming. I can't go home for Christmas in this kind of shape. The man who trained me will be there, and he'll be... I don't know, disappointed in me."

"Harry, be sensible. You almost died. You're going to hurt yourself if you keep this up."

"It was only a mile Padma." He was getting his wind back. "When Steve gets hold of me this would be a vacation. I've just got to get myself back into condition."
She stroked the hair out of his eyes. "Harry, please, just take it easier alright? If you kill yourself, who would Hermione and I feel superior too? We need you."

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July 25 1985:

Avengers Mansion

NYC New York.

Harry wandered aimlessly throughout the mansion. Jarvis had needed to come and take care of a few things at this house, and had allowed Harry to come along. Jarvis had told Harry to stay out of any room that looked like it might be a lab or had weapons in it. Harry always tried to mind.

This room didn't look like a lab, and it didn't look like a place for weapons. It looked kind of cool, with soft mats on the floor, mirrors on the walls and things that looked like the tires on a heavy axle, only metal. There was a tall blond man picking up the metal wheels by their axle. It was obviously very heavy; Harry could see the muscles stand out from his massive arms as he hefted the odd thing. He would lift it off the ground until he was standing upright, and then lift them from waist level to his chest several times.

Suddenly Harry remembered what a room like this was called. It was a gym. A place where people got stronger. He didn't think that the big blond man could get much stronger. When he lifted the big wheel things, the axle actually bent. Those wheels must be real heavy.

"Hello there. You must be Harry."

The big man had noticed him. "Yes Sir. I didn't mean to bother you."

"You're not bothering me Harry, I'm just doing my morning workout. My name's Steve by the way."

He put the big wheel things down; they made a 'clank' sound that Harry thought was funny. Steve was dressed in a white undershirt with no sleeves, and green pants that had many pockets, both where pockets normally were, and pouches on the legs as well. Harry thought that pants like that would be very handy for keeping interesting things in. Steve also wore a pair of laced up boots that went to about his mid calf. Those boots were black and very shiny. Harry thought that he might even be able to see his face in them if he got close enough.

"Do you work out Harry?"

"No sir. I think that Mr. Stark has a room like this, but it's a grownup place."

"He does, I set it up for him. I think he spends too much time in his office and using tools that don't let him use his muscles as much as he should. A young man like you doesn't need a lot of things like this." He gestured to the room. "But learning to keep yourself in good shape would probably be good for you."

"Could you show me Sir?"

"Well, we'd have to check with Tony first, but I think I could come by a couple times a week to help you out. Keeping up with an active young man like you would probably be good for me as well." He knelt to put himself eyelevel with the boy. "You might keep me young."

6a.m. the next morning Steve Rogers introduced Harry to his first lesson in physical education. An hour of Tai Chi followed by a quarter mile run before breakfast. Rogers never intended this lesson to
last more than a month. He never understood how important the time he spent with Harry was to him until the boy left for his school in Scotland six years later.

On November 12th Harry was finally healthy enough to rejoin the all house study group that met in the Great Hall following the evening meal most nights. Of course the first order of business was to explain what had happened to every student's satisfaction, and far more importantly, (at least to the older male students) and explanation of whom the hot redhead who spent so much time in the hospital wing was, and who the blonde woman who arrived with his father was. Harry explained as best he could, assuring more than one boy that, no they were not blood relations and that it was unlikely that they would be visiting again.

The Hufflepuffs were very interested in his relationship with Mistress Harkness, and if he had a way to communicate with her. He tried explaining that Mistress Harkness was an exceedingly private person and he could not just 'send her an owl' (a concept he still did not truly believe), but he would take any letters they cared to send home with him on the Christmas holiday and do what he could to see that she got them.

Then there were the Muggle raised and Muggle born who had made the association of Harry Stark and Stark International after seeing his father in the Great Hall when he was yelling at Dumbledore (Harry made a note to find out why his father had done that.) and when the elder Stark had taken a meal at the Ravenclaw table with Padma and Hermione. Suddenly many more people understood why his electronics worked here and he was bombarded with requests for the availability of commercial versions.

It took most of an hour for the group to actually get around to studying together. Harry was plowing through his transfiguration essay when Draco Malfoy settled into the seat next to him.

"Harry."

"Evening Draco. How are things in Slytherin house?"

"Quiet now that your excitement has settled down. What the hell did you do to that Troll?"

"I was accidentally shown how Chaos magic works. Before anyone knew I was doing it, I learned how to access the Chaos. It does a number on me, but it's effective."

"And that Redhead was your teacher?"

"Sorta kinda. She was learning to use it, and I watched. Like a little idiot, I emulated what she was doing, and boom, I almost killed myself. Since then she's been helping me with exercises to try to develop a little control without killing myself. Not working too well so far, but there you go."

"See? If you were a pureblood you wouldn't have that problem." The platinum haired boy looked pleased with himself.

"Actually if I was about 12 years older I wouldn't have that problem. Draco, seriously, not one of the 18 or so who qualify as masters of Chaos magic would fit in your definition of 'pure blood'. Hell, I think I'm the only actual wizard on the path to that mastery."

"The Redhead isn't?"

"Wanda is a witch, but not our kind. Her magic comes from education and talent, not biology. Her original power set is that of a mutant. The magic came later."
"But…"

"Draco, seriously, you've go to let go of all this bigotry. Who your father is doesn't matter a tinkers dam, it's who you are. It's fine to be proud of your father, I love mine so much I can't describe it, but his accomplishments aren't mine, they're his. Someday I may inherit his holdings, but I will never be half the man Tony Stark is, not in my wildest dreams."

Realizing that he wasn't going to get anymore work done, Harry packed his things away. "Just like I'll never be Tony Stark or James Potter since you're so hung up on biological lines, you will never be your father. At most you will imitate him, but you won't be him. But if you spend so much time trying to be your father, when will you be you? Who will your son look up to?"

As usual, Harry and Draco's discussions were gathering a crowd.

"You just don't understand."

"Oh, I fully acknowledge that. I have a problem wrapping my mind around your side. I suspect that you don't understand my position either. But that doesn't really matter, maybe we're not supposed to understand each other, maybe the whole purpose of our discussions is for each of us to express our positions so that others can hear what we have to say and form their own opinions."

"But the culture of the British Wizards is important! We have led the world in so many ways, diluting that culture with outsiders is weakening it."

"Culture IS important; you haven't heard and won't hear me say otherwise. But Draco, have you considered what would happen to your culture without those you call 'outsiders'?"

"What do you mean?" The blond boy was confused.

"Ok, think about it. How many siblings do you have?"

"None."

Harry smiled. "Exactly. Susan. You're a pureblood right? Any brothers or sisters?"

The Hufflepuff shook her head.

"Ok, of the purebloods here Weasley's excluded, how many of you have siblings?" Four hands went up.

"Hey!" Ron Weasley asked from the end of the table. "Why are Weasley's excluded?"

"Because we all knew you had siblings and you would throw the average off." Harry explained. "No offense intended. I should also exclude any twins from the sample. What that leaves is an entire generation of British Wizarding Purebloods that are only children. When you look further up your family trees do you have lots of Aunts and Uncles? If said Aunts and Uncles didn't have kids, they don't count. For what ever reason my research in the library showed me that for about 6 generations pureblood families have, by and large, had single children. The Mundane Aristocracy calls their versions of it having 'An Heir and a Spare', but you pure bloods by and large aren't bothering with the spare. In order to maintain a population level, a family needs to have two children, but they haven't been doing that. Without 'outsiders' like the First Generations magic users and immigrants like the Patils, the Purebloods with likely be extinct in seven or eight more generations."

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"Harry!" Franklin Richards ran into the room with a large gift wrapped in his arms.

"Hi Franklin. Glad you could come." He took the gift that Franklin handed him. "Thanks. Are your uncles coming?"

"Unca Ben wanted to, but Mom said that he would hog all the cake." The Blond boy laughed. "He said that he would only eat half the cake, and then teach us to play a card game named 'poker'."

"I wish he had come, he is so cool."

Harry led Franklin to the dining room.

"Hey! There are girls in there."

"Yeah, Pepper said I could invite everyone from my class at Stark Day Care. All seven of them came."

"I don't like girls."

"Franklin, they're fun. Besides, more people here means more people to play with."

"But Harry, they're girls!"

"Yeah, but they came. This is my first party. I was worried that no one would come."

Franklin boggled at the idea of not having a birthday party before. He followed Harry into the party and found himself having fun. After several games and a water balloon fight on the lawn (won by the three girls in attendance because they banded together and ganged up on the boys who were all acting as individuals) it was time for presents.

Harry got books from all his class mates, because when he was asked in class what he wanted, he answered the first thing that popped into his mind. His first gifts were things he could actually use. As Jarvis had told him once, a young man could never have too many books.

From Franklin and his uncles got a robot fighting game, only instead of the red and blue robots, Franklin's father Reed had modified the toy to look like Franklin's Uncle Ben and a big green man. The little robots spoke, the 'Ben' said things like "It's Clobbering Time" and "I'm the Idol of Millions" and the Green Man said things like "Hulk Smash" and "Hulk is the strongest there is". It bored the girls but the boys all thought that it was the coolest toy ever."

Harry looked up from watching Franklin playing one of the other boys at the game and saw that Tony had come in. He ran over.

"Thank you. This is the most fun I've ever had."

"Glad you're having fun kiddo. Looks like you missed one present." The man handed the boy a small flat box. Harry opened it and withdrew a sheaf of papers. The papers were filled with big words he didn't understand, but he saw his name a few times on the top page. He looked up questioningly.

"I tried Harry, I really tried, but it takes a while to have an adoption go through. Those papers say
that I can't officially adopt you until next May. That's ten months away."

"I understand. Thank you for trying. Where do I go now?"

"You don't understand Harry. You aren't going anywhere. We are a family, you and me; it just won't be official until May. For now, you stay here, and I'm your court appointed guardian until May."

"I... I... I'm staying?"

"Yes you are. You're going to be my son, just not until May. Until then, could you do me a favor?"

"Yes, yes, anything."

"I was hoping that you might find it in your heart to call me Dad so we could practice for May. Could you do that for me Harry?"

The boy launched himself onto the man's lap and wrapped his arms around the man's neck. "I love you Daddy!" and he began to cry into the man's neck.

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"You wanted to speak with me Headmaster?"

"Yes Mr. Stark, please come in, have a seat."

Harry took a seat in front of the Headmasters desk. In the back of the room behind Dumbledore stood a pair of adults he didn't know. Both were redheads, and both seemed to look at him with some kind of reverence. This was more than a little disturbing. Who were these people, and why did they look at him like that?

Seeing Harry's gaze fall on his guests, Dumbledore continued. "Harry, this is Arthur and Molly Weasley, the parents of Ron and Percy Weasley."

Harry nodded his greeting, still wondering why these people were here. Part of him wondered if Dumbledore had ever just gotten to the point in a discussion in his entire life.

Arthur Weasley stepped forward. "Harry, I would like to extend an invitation to spend the Christmas holiday with us at our home."

Harry blinked. Twice. "I thank you for the offer Mr. Weasley, but I'm confused by it. I barely know your son Ron, and have said about ten words to Percy. I have no idea why you would ask me to spend the Christmas Holidays with you. I have a father and home to go to, I'm not in need of a place to go."

"Professor Dumbledore suggested we ask you, it would give you a chance to reacquaint yourself with the traditions of your heritage. For us the honor of having Harry Potter spend Christmas with us cannot be exaggerated." Molly Weasley said. "Besides our daughter has had a crush on you since she first heard the story of the Boy Who Lived."

Harry sat back in the chair. Were these people for real? "Mrs. Weasley, my name is Harry Stark, and it has been since I was 5 years old. Truthfully I don't really care that much about my heritage. I love my father and fully intend to spend Christmas with him. I thank you for your offer, but no thank you."

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore interrupted. "I really must insist that you consider this offer. You need to
connect to your lost heritage. How can you expect to be prepared for your destiny if you are unaware of who you are?"

"Headmaster, you've got to be kidding. You come to me a week before the beginning of the holidays and want me to contact my father and tell him, 'Sorry dad, but some complete strangers offered to let me stay at their home for Christmas, so I decided to accept. Don't forget to write Dad.' Why would I even want to do that? And as far as knowing who I am, I am Harry Stark. The son of Tony Stark."

"Adopted Son."

"Which means infinitely more than being born to him. He consciously chose to love me, to accept me, and to give me his name and his home. Do not try and tell me who my father is Headmaster. Was there anything else?"

"No Mr. Stark, you rudeness will be noted however."

"I think perhaps we have differing ideas about what is rude Headmaster." Harry had never been so angry. "Mr., Mrs. Weasley, my apologies for all of this."

…-ooo000ooo-…

A/N: There have been many requests for explanations and profiles of the Marvel Universe characters mentioned and appearing in this story, so from here on out at the end of each chapter I will have a profile for each character from the Marvel Universe that is used. For the record, I am using the Marvel Comics Universe as of 1992, not any movies or animated appearances they may have. The following is a listing of the characters I have used so far since chapter 1.

Character profiles:

Chapter 1.

In order of appearance

Tony Stark, Billionaire industrialist, Genius level IQ, if it can be made, he's got 2. If it can't be made, he's only got the prototype. Secretly (at the time of the story) Ironman. The Ironman Armor is form fitting Mech, with flight capabilities (ground to orbit with auxiliary boosters) near infinite defensive capabilities, many many offensive capabilities.

Stephen – Steven Strange, the Sorcerer Supreme of Earth. The single most powerful mortal magic user alive. Capabilities: astral projection (basically sending his ghost where he doesn't want to send his body. Flight with his levitation cloak, many other mystical 'tools'. Most specifically NOT a wizard.

Steve – Steve Rogers also know as Captain America. Most specifically someone you do NOT want to get in a fight with. Powers: None. He is the ultimate Soldier, created in the Early Years of WWII by exposure to the Super Soldier Formula and exposure to an unspecified radiation.

Clint – Clint Barton, also known as Hawkeye. A master Archer, with gimmick arrows, but not as silly as the DC Universe's Green Arrow's Boxing gloves arrows.

Wanda – Wanda Maximoff, also known as the Scarlet Witch. A mutant with the ability to affect probabilities. By the time of this story she had mastered Chaos magic.
Mistress Harkness – Agatha Harkness, survivor of the Salem Witch trials, and for the purposes of this story, alum of Hogwarts. Hufflepuff 1680. The single most powerful Witch in the world.

Jarvis – Edwin Jarvis, Stark family Butler. Hails from Brooklyn, but affects a British dialect.

Pepper – Pepper Hogan nee Potts. Tony Starks Personal Assistant. Don't call her a secretary. Unpleasant things happen to people who call her a secretary. She isn't Stark International's highest paid employee for no reason.

Happy – Happy Hogan. Tony Stark's Driver and Personal Assistant. Call your doctor, and then start trouble.

Rhodey – James Rhodes. At one time he was Tony Stark's pilot. At the time of the Story he is the Hero War Machine. A far less fuzzy and cuddly variant of the Ironman armor. The War Machine armor isn't for rescuing kittens from trees, it is for destroying entire armies.

Julie Power – Lightspeed (at the time) of the Power Pack. Capabilities: High speed Flight

Reed – Reed Richards, Mr. Fantastic of the Fantastic Four. Arguably the smartest man on the planet. Can lick the small of his own back. Victor VonDoom is likely to be the only one arguing.

Ben – Ben Grim, the Thing of the Fantastic Four. Orange Rock like epidermis, very strong. The 3rd or 4th strongest person on Earth depending on who's doing the estimating.

Namor – Namor King of Atlantis. The son of a human sea captain and of a princess of the mythical undersea kingdom of Atlantis, Namor possesses the super-strength and aquatic abilities of the "Homo mermanus" race.

Thor – Thor Odinson, Norse God of Thunder. Immortal, very strong, speaks for no adequately explained reason in Shakespearian Prose. Carries the enchanted battle mallet Mjolnir always returns to his hand when thrown. No one not worthy to be Thor can lift Mjolnir.

Hank Pym – Hank Pym has had several code names over the years. Ant man, Giant man, Yellowjacket, and others (including oddly enough Hank Pym) through the uses of Pym Particles he can change size from the size of an ant to 30 feet tall. At the time of the story he was Yellowjacket, (who usually shrunk, but occasionally got tall.)

Chapter 2.

Agatha, Wanda and Stephen Strange, see above.

T'Challa – King of Wakanda, also know as the hero Black Panther. Near Captain America level physical fighter.

Chapter 3

Tony, Happy, Pepper, Stephen Strange, See above

Chapter 4

Hank – Hank McCoy PhD. Biochemistry. PhD Genetics. PhD Physics. M. D. Large man, covered with Blue fur, his feet are as dexterous as his hands, very strong, very agile, very fast. Most commonly associated with the X-men using his imaginative codename "Beast" He spent several years with the Avengers
Chapter 5

Blond man – Brian Braddock, also known as Captain Britain. Super strong, capable of flight, entrusted with the power of Merlyn in this reality.

Barefoot woman – Megan. Also known as Megan. An earth spirit, or possibly an environmental empath. She has earth powers.

Both Brian and Megan are members of the British Supergroup Excalibur.

Large Orange Rock man – Ben Grim. See above

Franklin – Franklin Richards Son of Reed Richards and Susan Richards nee Storm. Cosmic level Psi, currently damped down by his fathers technology to prevent the young boy from destroying the world, and possibly universe. When running with the Power Pack he had the single most unfortunate hero code name in the history of comics, even worse than 'The Whizzer' (who inexplicably wore a yellow uniform). Franklin was known as "Tattletale" when he ran with the Pack.

Unca Johnny – Johnny Storm, the Human Torch of the Fantastic Four. Controls flame and heat, can burst into flame and fly, though the mechanism for this is never explained. His favorite hobby, abusing Ben Grim.

Chapter 6

Pepper, Tony, Rhodey, Agatha Harkness, Wanda, Jarvis, Steve, Franklin, Ben, et al. see above.
Chapter Seven – Prisoner of the Light.

December 3 1985:

The Baxter Building

NYC New York.

"Well Tony, it wasn't easy, but this is what is frying your systems." The man in the blue body suit and lab coat reached quite literally across the room and handed Stark a file then retracted his arm back to a more human length. "It took forever to isolate, but this is the energy he generates when he's accessing his magic, intentionally or otherwise."

Stark skimmed through the charts and readouts in the file. "High energy, broad spectrum, propagation rate..." He looked up shocked. "Is this propagation rate right Reed?"

"I checked five times. The energy field propagates instantaneously. I could find no delay within the detection range of my instruments. FTL. It just IS. It isn't the magic it's self. This is more of a 'carrier field' that allows the magic to function within it." Reed Richards ran his hand through his hair.

"There must be a way to shield for this."

"Shield for it? That'll be a bitch, just look at the energy out put. Harry does this biologically?"

"Yes, and he's completely unconscious of it. He puts as much of his mind to generating this field as you do to digesting your dinner. It is the carrier is disrupting your systems, not the actual magic. His energy reserves for the actual doing of his magic are fairly limited. I assume that they will grow with him; the carrier on the other hand doesn't seem to be limited. There does seem to be an emotional component to the carrier though. When he and Franklin were playing yesterday I managed to maintain the scans on him for 9 hours. The carrier was present and at what I assume to be its full strength the entire time with two notable exceptions. The first appeared when he assisted Franklin in his chores, which yesterday was to clean his bathroom."

"Harry over did it didn't he?" Stark smiled grimly.
"Yes. What Sue considers cleaning his bathroom means she expected Franklin to empty his trash can, clean the sink, hang up his towel, and sweep the floor, and that's all Franklin intended to do. Harry insisted that it wasn't good enough. When he was done an hour later, the bath was spotless. Sue will be the first to tell you she has never cleaned the room that thoroughly, hell the robots I built to maintain the building don't clean that thoroughly. Harry's carrier dropped off to levels below what my instruments could detect as soon as he began the chore, and didn't come back until Sue assured him that he had done the job properly. I suspect that at some point the boy has been abused."

"That is a likely. In the accident that killed his guardians, he was frightened and looked to his Aunt for comfort. He got backhanded for his trouble."

"They're dead then? Good." Richards had seen a lot of what was generally considered 'evil' but to lay hands on a child… unforgivable. "The other time the carrier was reduced was when he and Franklin took a nap. I think the nap was more for Susan's benefit than the boys, but as soon as they settled down, both of them, Harry's readings indicated that the field collapsed into his body until my instruments could barely detect it. In short there is a constant field around him, it intensifies in response to his emotions, and fades when he seemingly responds to certain conditioned commands, to the point that when he is responding to that conditioning his magic is even more restrained than when he is asleep."

"Wonderful. Well with this data I can at least start looking for a way to try and shield for it, I mean unless…"

"I know that look Tony, what are you thinking about?"

Tony Stark was paging through the data looking for the graphs that depicted the energy throughput of his adopted son's magical carrier field. "Look at this Reed. Look at the amount of energy this field carries."

"Yeah, I saw that, the energy levels alone will make it a bear to shield for"

"But what if you were to use the energy of the field as a power source?"

Reed Richards AKA Mr. Fantastic was shocked. He then moved to his computers, and started typing commanding the systems to run simulation after simulation. "Ok, see now this is why I do theoretical work and live off my patents and you purchase patent rights and produce things and are a billionaire. That never occurred to me. Using the energy field as a power source, that's just brilliant."

"Happy New Year Albus."

"Thank you for seeing me Cornelius. How is the new year treating you?" The headmaster eschewed the hard backed chairs of the Minister for Magic's office and conjured a plush chintz chair that he sat upon, arranging his robes for maximum effect.

"Oh fine Albus, just fine. What can I do for the Chief Mugwump today?" What did the old fool want?

"I'm here to discuss Harry Potter."

"Yes, I heard he had come to Hogwarts. What in particular did you want to discuss?"
Cornelius, as you know, the boy was placed with his mother's sister and her family after the fall of the Dark Lord. In 1985 young Potter accompanied his family on a business trip to the United States. While there they were involved in some sort of Muggle accident and were killed.

"Killed you say?" Fudge sat up in his chair, suddenly alert. "Potter was orphaned again?"

"Yes. He was adopted by an American industrialist named Stark. Young Harry is rather taken with the man." Time to set the hook. "The lad has suggested that he may be giving up his British citizenship in order to become an American."

"Harry Potter is planning to abandon Britain?"

"At what I suspect might be the urging of his adopted father."

"We can't be having that. Why was a wizard, especially Harry Potter allowed to be adopted by a Yank Muggle?"

"I don't know, Harry accompanied them on a business trip and disappeared. It seems that the Americans never notified us of their deaths." Perfect. Fudge was buying it hook line and sinker.

Harry returned to his dorm from the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist. Where was his Techsuit? Where was his trunk? The Techsuit had been laid out on his bed, the trunk at the foot of the bed.

Harry opened the wardrobe to see if some joker had hidden his things from him. It WAS April 1st, perhaps he had offended the wrong person. Hogwarts managed to generate some ingenious practical jokers. Being in Ravenclaw protected him (somewhat) from the Weasley Twins (who were the acknowledged Kings of Chaos in the school), but the 'claws themselves had a joker or two.

The wardrobe held his robes and other clothing, and nothing more. Every piece of Stark-tech electronics was gone.

Penny Clearwater was the first Prefect Harry found. He reported his missing property to her. She led him to Professor Flitwick's office to report the possible theft.

"Thank you Miss Clearwater. I will deal with this." The small man waited until the 5th year had exited his office, and then turned to his first year Ravenclaw. "I'm sorry Mr. Stark, but the Headmaster had the House Elves confiscate your things. They have been declared contraband."

"So, rather than asking me to turn them in, or allowing me to send them home, he just took them? In most civilized societies that is called theft."

"I can't say I disagree Mr. Stark. Unfortunately there is little I can do about it." Harry's Head of House looked more than a little embarrassed. "I'm afraid that this is just the start Harry. I have heard some disturbing things recently. When you have been teaching as long as I have one develops a network of former students who tell their old teacher things. There is a move afoot to attempt to nullify your adoption on the grounds that a Muggle should never have been allowed to adopt a Wizard."

"I see. So the confiscation of my tech is designed to prevent me from communicating with my father?"
Filius was shocked. He had expected an explosion. The boy was clearly angry, but controlled. "I believe so, yes."

"Do they know who they are antagonizing? Are they aware of the resources my father can marshal against them?"

"I doubt it." He smiled grimly. "There is an institutional blindness to the Muggle world in our government. For the most part they seem to believe that the Muggles are still, well, easily cowed."

The older man shook his head. "Nothing good can come from this Harry. The Headmaster has modified the wards to prevent your leaving the castle grounds. I don't know how long it will be before…"

"Thank you for your honesty Professor." The boy's face clouded for a moment, then calm reasserted it's self. "Might I request an audience with the Warden… Excuse me, with the Headmaster?"

"I will relay your request Mr. Stark."

"Thank you again Professor, I feel I should warn you I will probably be costing the Ravenclaws house points. I feel a rash of civil disobedience coming on."

-ooo000ooo-

It took a week for the Great and Powerful Dumbledore to meet with Harry. Filius Flitwick was deeply conflicted. His competitive nature hated each point that young Stark was costing the house (thought he had to admit, the Ravenclaws themselves were dealing with it in an unusual show of solidarity. Harry had explained what he was doing and why he was doing it. His House was rallying around a member they viewed as wronged.) On the other hand, Albus was wrong.

Since the confiscation of his things, Stark hadn't attended a single class. Detentions were assigned, and ignored. Well, not truly ignored. In each case Harry had forwarded a note to the teacher in question explaining that as far as he was concerned he was no longer a student, but a prisoner. As such he saw no obligation to abide by the rules of the Warden.

Worse, the boy had taken to spending his now copious free time fulfilling his promise of 'civil disobedience'. If there was a place to be that would inconvenience the Headmaster, Stark was there. He has spent a day in the kitchens with the house elves and at dinner all the food was orange in a way that strangely excited the youngest Weasley over in Gryffindor. He did nothing destructive, nothing disruptive, but made sure that he annoyed the Headmaster at every opportunity.

Now Filius found himself sitting in the Headmaster's office waiting for the boy to report for the meeting he had requested. There was a knock at the door.

"Enter." Albus intoned in his best Superior Headmaster voice.

The door opened to reveal Harry Stark.

"Come in Harry. Take a seat."

Sitting, the boy nodded to acknowledge his head of house. "Good morning Warden."

"Ah yes, your new nick name for me. How very droll Mr. Stark."

"It seemed appropriate, isn't 'Warden' the traditional title for the head of a facility that houses prisoners?"
"Is that how you see yourself Mr. Stark?"

"Well, let's see: I cannot leave, my communications with the outside world are restricted, I'm allowed no visitors, and my personal property was summarily confiscated. Yes, prisoner does seem to describe my situation quite well."

"Be that as it may, you must resume attending class Mr. Stark."

"Why?"

"Why to learn of course."

"I'm sorry, but I am interested in nothing this facility has to offer. Were I to attend class, I would be a disruptive influence in the class, and everyone would suffer."

Filius saw Albus' jaw clench in anger. "Perhaps you should learn to control your baser instincts Mr. Stark."

"To what end Professor? I am no longer a student here, I am a prisoner. Perhaps I will continue to act out until such time as you expel me, but prisoners aren't expelled, they are released. Either way I will leave this place and never return. How long do you suppose my Father will tolerate my not communicating with him before he comes for me? He's proven he can come here before."

"Mr. Stark, what I do is for the greater good."

"The greater good as defined by whom? When you tried to convince me to come to Hogwarts you spoke of my destiny. Screw this destiny you speak of."

"You are acting like a child Mr. Stark."

"I AM a child Professor. What's your excuse?"

…-ooo000oooo-…

Harry fought to keep control of his emotions. Losing control would not be a smart thing to do. The large dungeon he had entered was horribly medieval. What is it with these people that have them so fixated in the 12th century?

The walls were made of dark roughly cut granite, dimly lit by torches. Benches rose on either side of him filled with what he assumed to be spectators, but ahead, in the highest benches of all, were many shadowy figures. They had been talking in low voices, but as the heavy door swung closed behind Harry an ominous silence fell.

An icy male voice rang across the courtroom.

"You're late."

"This is me caring," said Harry dismissively "I go where my jailor sends me when he sends me."

"That is not the Wizengamot's concern," said the voice. "This Hearing was scheduled for 10am. It is now 10.03. Take your seat."

"The Wizengamot can bite me." Harry suggested helpfully. Harry looked around noticing the chair he was evidently supposed to use in the center of the room, the arms of which were covered in chains. He suspected those chains were intended to hold whoever sat between them. His footsteps echoed loudly as he walked across the stone floor. When he reached the chair he placed his right
hand on the high back and silently incanted a disruption charm that Mistress Harkness had taught him the year before. The magically created chains corroded to dust silently. No one seemed to notice. Dropping his book bag, he flopped into the chair slinging his left leg over the left armrest. Putting on an air of extreme relaxation, he bit back his anger and looked up at the people seated at the bench above.

There were about fifty of them, all, as far as he could see, wearing plum-colored robes with an elaborate silver W on the left-hand side of the chest and all staring down at him, some with very serious expressions, others looks of frank curiosity.

In the very middle of the front row sat Albus Dumbledore. Harry had expected this. His research he had done since his house arrest had informed him that the Headmaster was the ‘Chief Warlock’ of the Wizengamot. Cornelius Fudge, the Minister for Magic sat to Dumbledore’s immediate left. Fudge was a portly man. A broad, square-jawed witch with very short grey hair sat on Dumbledore’s right; she wore a monocle and looked forbidding. This woman fit the description of Susan’s Aunt Amelia. Part of Harry wondered if the monocle was actually needed for just there for effect.

"Very well," said Dumbledore. "The victim being present - finally - let us begin. Are you ready?" he called down the row.

"Yes, sir," said an eager voice Harry recognized as the sanctimonious ass who had commented on his lateness.

"Procedural hearing of the twelfth of May, 1992." said Fudge in a ringing voice, and the sycophant began taking notes at once, "into the illegal adoption of Harry James Potter, late of number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey By Anthony Stark, a known Muggle.."

"Interrogators: Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister for Magic; Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot; Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister."

Dumbledore stood and shuffled some notes. "Well then, shall we begin?" He extricated a piece of parchment from the pile before him, and read out, "the question before us is was the adoption of Harry James Potter by a Muggle with no connection to the Magical World a legal act in accordance with Paragraph F of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, and also under Section 24 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy.

"You are Harry James Potter, of number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey?" Fudge said, glaring at Harry from the bench.

Harry reached down into his book bag. "No." Harry withdrew a book from his bag and thumbed through it to the page he wanted and began to read.

"You are not Harry James Potter, of number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey?" Fudge asked incredulously.

Harry looked up from his book. "No, I am not."

"You are." Fudge was turning an interesting shade of purple.

"I'm not." Harry responded happily.

"You are."
"As stimulating a conversation as this appears to be, let us cut to the chase. Who are you then young man?" asked the gray haired witch with the monocle.

"I am Harry James Stark of 5847 Stark Lane, Stark Township, The state of New York, United States."

"We will be correcting that today young man. You never should have been allowed to be adopted by this Muggle Stark. That alone violated several laws." Fudge blustered.

Harry nodded and returned to his book.

"You don't seem overly concerned Mr. Potter." The Witch to Fudge's immediate left said in an oddly girlish, high-pitched voice.

Harry did not respond, or even acknowledge that he had been spoken to. He turned the page in his book.

"Mr. Potter, you will respond when you are spoken to." The witch said clearly angry. Harry continued to ignore her.

"Mr. Potter!" Dumbledore spoke up. No response from Harry. "Harry!"

Harry looked up. "Yes Warden?"

Dumbledore blinked. "Warden? Young man we have spoken about you using that term for me."

"I couldn't remember your title here, so I went with what we call you at school. That is the proper title for someone who heads a facility where one is held against his will and deprived of his personal property isn't it?"

"Putting your flights of fancy aside, you must respond when spoken to."

Harry looked puzzled. "I thought I was."

"You completely ignored Madam Umbridge just now." Dumbledore said in his understanding grandfather way.

"Did I? I apologize, who is this Madam Umbridge and when did she speak with me?"

"I am Dolores Umbridge Mr. Potter."

Harry continued to look at Dumbledore expectantly, ignoring the witch.

Dumbledore was actually becoming angry with the boy. "Mr. Potter, you must show proper respect toward the Wizengamot!"

Harry's look of expectation dimmed and he returned to his book.

"Mr. Potter!" chorused The Chief Warlock, The Minister of Magic, and his Senior Under Secretary. All three of them were promptly ignored by Harry.

"Mr. Stark?" Asked the Grey haired Witch with the monocle. She wore more than a hint of a smile.

"Yes Ma'am?"

"When my esteemed colleagues address "Mr. Potter" they are addressing you."
"They are?" Harry put on an expression of confusion. "I clearly stated my name when you asked. Are they slow?"

"I sometimes wonder. Madam Umbridge has noted that you do not seem overly concerned about this hearing. I must admit to being surprised by your level of concern myself. Do you understand what is happening here?"

"Certainly I do Ma'am. I'm not the one too slow to use someone's name when I know it. This body intends to set aside my adoption and will attempt to tell me that my father isn't my father."

"And this doesn't concern you?"

"Only to the extent that I worry that innocents might get hurt when my father comes for me. And he will. The only reason he isn't here now is I wanted to give you a chance to behave like decent human beings before I call the wrath of God down upon you, so I didn't tell him what you are doing." The boy looked thoughtful for a moment. "Warden Dumbledore assisted in my not informing my father of what all of you were doing by stealing my usual methods of contacting my father, and somehow causing the school owls to refuse my letters. Of course, he forgot that I have friends outside my house willing to post letters for me…"

Amelia Bones smiled in a tolerant manner. "Do you actually believe that your father could mount an actual attack against us?"

"Does the name Tony Stark mean nothing to you?"

Amelia paled. She knew that name well from her contacts with Muggle Law Enforcement. The paperwork had been referring to the Muggle as 'Anthony'. She had never made the association. "You mean your father is the man who finances the Avengers?"

"Yes. They like me as well, and aren't too fond of kidnappers, not even those who hide behind the trappings of government." He paused, "When I said I would be calling down the wrath of God, I misspoke, it would be the wrath of several gods, I believe Hercules and Sersi are currently in residence, and Thor of course. You can always count on Thor for a good smiting…"

"You will learn to respect your betters Potter!"

Harry returned to his book. "Gotta love that Garfield, boy that cat hates Mondays" He said chuckling.

"If it would please the court, might I be permitted to speak?" A tall man in conservative robes stood in the gallery.

"And you are?"

"Roberts Michaels Chief Warlock. Deputy Chief Assistant for Magical Affairs to the United States Ambassador to the Court of St James."

"You have business before this court pertaining to this case?" Dumbledore asked. How had the Americans found out?

"Indeed I do Chief Warlock. Young Mr. Stark was legally adopted under the laws of the United States where he was when he was orphaned for the second time. Information pertaining to the deaths of the Dursleys was forwarded by my office to the Ministry of Magic's Hall of Records since the minor child in question gave clear evidence of being a Wizard. I have the signed receipts for those letters of information in accordance with the procedures set forth by the ICW. Repeated requests
from my office as to what your government wanted to do with young Mr. Stark, then Potter were ignored, until finally we got a note from the Head Archivist of your Hall of records that there were no 'Dursleys' on the rolls, and that the only 'Evans' they could find were Muggle Born. We were directed to deal with the child as we saw fit and not to bother her unless and until we had a 'Real Wizarding Child' to report. I queried what precisely made a 'Real Wizarding Child' and was told one with Pure Blood Status. Both the report and the response to my question were signed by one Dolores Jane Umbridge. The only living relative we could find, one Margaret Dursley refused to accept the boy. If, as you say, you lost track of the boy, you have only yourselves to blame for putting incompetent bigots in positions of authority. The Elder Mr. Stark was an excellent candidate to adopt Harry due to his having the resources to allow the boy to discover his abilities, which he has done quite admirably, as I know you are aware, Mr. Stark was at the top of his class at Hogwarts."

"This is true, however…"

"We will brook no interference from the Americans." Fudge spat interrupting Dumbledore. "You have no authority here Mr. Deputy Chief Assistant for Magical Affairs. Begone before I have you removed."

"As you wish." Michaels gathered his things, shaking his head. "Your funeral. I have been directed by my government to tell you one other thing. Should you go ahead with this travesty you are planning, the Avengers will be given carte' blanche to do whatever they need to do to reunite Mr. Stark and his father." He passed the clerk of the court a document. "This details the official position of the United States. Copies of this are being delivered to the Mundane Prime Minister and Her Majesty the Queen as we speak. Consider what you are doing." All eyes were on the Yank official as he exited the courtroom.

That was unexpected. Harry wondered who had called the embassy to get this started… The Weasley twins had assisted him in getting messages out through their own methods (he hadn't asked, not knowing he couldn't give them away) this seemed a very Hermione thing to do… Her parents perhaps?

The doors at the rear of the chamber burst open and Harry heard the voice he had been waiting for. He didn't even need to turn to see what was happening. This was going to be good.

"I say thee, I will be heard. Thou try my patients Mortals!"

"What is the meaning of this?" Fudge sputtered. "Who are you? Identify yourself!"

The huge man in the winged helm brandished his battle mallet. "I be Thor of Asgard, son of Odin, God of Thunder mortal. Stay thy minions before I am forced to slay them."

"You would slay good men and women only doing their jobs?" Amelia Bones asked from the bench.

The thunder god considered her words. "Thy make sense Maiden. Rather than slay them, I would slay their masters whose commands they follow."

"Aurors, stand down!" Fudge called out immediately.

"Why are you here Thunder God?" Dumbledore asked when the courtroom quieted.

"I come to speak for the son of my comrade, and to return him to his father."

"And if we refuse to release him to you?"
"Then I slay you all, in the way of the old Norse, leave not a single stone in this magnificent building touching any other stone in this building, then I return young Harry to his father."

"You can't kill them all Thor. Steve wouldn't like it." Harry spoke up.

"Yea, thou art correct Harry. Alright, I will only kill the leaders. And destroy the building.

"Are you threatening the Minister?" Umbridge asked incredulously.

"Aye, I am." Thor replied, happy that the mortals understood him.

There was a quick conference of the Wizengamot where Amelia Bones explained that this being was more than capable of doing what he threatened, and that he was one of the calmer, gentler people that the elder Stark associated with. Dumbledore was voted down in a single voice vote.

"It is the opinion and ruling of the Wizengamot that the adoption of Harry Potter by Anthony Stark was valid and legal in every way. We thank Harry Stark for his time and excuse him from these proceedings. Then the people in the plum robes hurriedly left the room.

The Thunder God picked Harry up and set the boy on his shoulder, then turned to leave the room.

"Harry!"

"What do you want Professor?"

"I may have gone about this all the wrong way, but your destiny…"

"After what you did, I find I don't much care about any 'destiny' you have plotted out for me Headmaster. I expect to have my property returned by tomorrow, you know where I live."

Dumbledore hung his head, how had it gone so wrong? Suddenly he found his head lifted by the head of a battle mallet under his chin.

"Make no mistake little Wizard, never do this again. Thy life hung by a thread this day, there is no crime lower than the stealing of a man's child. Harry's father would truly make thou pay for what thou have done. Be thy very glad thou only had to face me."

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Character profiles:

**Chapter 7**

In order of appearance

Reed – Reed Richards, Mr. Fantastic of the Fantastic Four. Not so named by his wife despite the fact that he can lick the small of his back. Arguably the smartest man on the planet. Victor VonDoom would most likely be the only one arguing.

Tony Stark, Billionaire industrialist, Genius level IQ, if it can be made, he's got 2. If it can't be made, he's only got the prototype. Secretly (at the time of the story) Ironman. The Ironman Armor is form fitting Mech, with flight capabilities (ground to orbit with auxiliary boosters) near infinite defensive capabilities, many many offensive capabilities.

Franklin – Franklin Richards Son of Reed Richards and Susan Richards nee Storm. Cosmic level Psi, currently damped down by his father's technology to prevent the young boy from destroying the
world, and possibly universe. When running with the Power Pack he had the single most unfortunate hero code name in the history of comics, even worse than 'The Whizzer' (who inexplicably wore a yellow uniform). Franklin was known as "Tattletale" when he ran with the Pack.

Sue - Susan Richards nee Storm. The Invisible Woman, as her name indicates capable of invisibility, both herself and others. Can project invisible force bubbles of any shape or sharpness. Arguably the most powerful/dangerous of the Fantastic Four. Wife of Reed Richards, Sister of Johnny Storm, Mother of Franklin Richards.

Thor – Thor Odinson, Norse God of Thunder. Immortal, very strong, speaks for no adequately explained reason in Shakespearian Prose. Carries the enchanted battle mallet Mjolnir always returns to his hand when thrown. No one not worthy to be Thor can lift Mjolnir.

Hercules – Greco/Roman demi-god. Immortal and Thor-level powerful. If he were the 'god of' anything he would be the God of the Bar Fight. Likes to party.

Sersi – An immortal External, the inspiration for the stories of the Greco goddess Circe of turning men into animals fame. Mistress of Transmutation (herself and others) Very powerful. Loves to party, though you might not survive the experience.

A/N: A few thoughts.

It has been suggested by some reviewers that I have 'grossly over powered' the various Marvel characters appearing in cameo in this story. I don't believe that I have. I am an old time comics geek, and as far as I can determine, if anything, I have under powered the Marvels...

It has been suggested that by having the Marvels in the mix, I have negated any suspense in the story. A suggestion I may have partially validated with this chapter, I admit, but I really wanted at least one Thor scene. This example has been offered:

Riddle: "I am Dark Lord Voldemort. I am the cruelest, most dangerous Dark Lord EVER, I aspire to immortality! Bow before me."

Thor: "I am Thor, Son of Odin, I am a god, and I have immortality. The first couple of millennia are kind of boring, but it perks up after that. I bow to no one."

Riddle: "Well, crap."

I can see the above point, even if I disagree with it. I mean if the above sentiment were true, there would be only 7 or 8 books in the Marvel stable right? Just Thor and the guys who could give Thor a run for his money… And surely Thor has taken care of all the minor baddies in the Marvel Universe, right? For your review:

Petruski: "I am The Trapster. I am the cruelest, most dangerous adhesive based criminal EVER, I aspire to steal your wallet! Bow before me."

Thor: "I am Thor, Son of Odin, I am a god, I have no wallet, but I do have this spiffy mallet. What is your least favorite bone to be pulverized? By the way, didn't you use to go by Paste-Pot Pete? I bow to no one."

Petruski: "Well, crap."

So, obviously since Thor could easily do this, the Trapster has hung up his glue gun and now spends
his evenings at Scrapbooking seminars… Right?

And don't get me started on the Ringer… Now that I think about it, the Ringer would be a good 'villain' ally for Riddle… If you don't get the reference, don't worry about it, I'm not actually going to do it, besides only the most severely geeked out Comics 'tards would instantly recognize the worst bad guy ever. (That's worst as in 'not very good at what he was trying to do'… Much like Riddle now that I think about it)

Could Thor slap the dog shit out of Tommy and his merry men? Certainly. But why would he? He tends to focus on Avenger Level villains, bargain basement Magicians who are smacked down by toddlers aren't really his kind of bad guy.

To be clear: The Marvels aren't the story. Harry is. The Marvels aren't going to face down Riddle in the final confrontation. Harry is. The Marvels are cameos, they will have as much effect on the story as Hermione's parents. They will be there, but in the back ground.

Of course, actually winning and managing to kill Harry would be the biggest (and likely last) mistake Riddle could ever make… He might find out what a real Thor Shot is like… IF he were lucky. If he were unlucky he'd find out what Steve Rogers can do when he gets angry… I would suspect that immortality would pale in it's attractiveness when combined with the painful memory of that non-stop everlasting butt-whipping never ever really manages to fade…
The tall man had spotted the boy only a few seconds before as Harry had run around the corner of the subbasement corridor giggling. Simon Williams gave chase, barreling around the corner only to run head on into Hank McCoy, who was hanging from an overhead support beam by his toes. The collision dropped the both of them painfully to the floor.

"Did you find him?"

Williams gave his best friend a filthy look. "Oh yes Hank, I found him. That's why I'm running through this subbasement like an idiot." He pulled himself to a standing position, and then reached down to help McCoy to his feet. "Harry was right HERE, not four seconds ago, he ran around this corner, I take it you didn't see him?"

"He must be doing that magical stealth thing again." McCoy said, brushing dust out of his blue fur. His ears pricked up. Was that giggling? He looked about... nothing.

"Sure we can stay with Harry, Tony' you said." Simon said picking himself up. "How much trouble can a nine year old be Simon?" you said. The answer is quite a bit."

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The Quinjet performed a flawless vertical landing on the helipad of the Stark Estate. Harry thanked Thor for what seemed the thousandth time for his help. The Thunder God gently cuffed the boy, then with a frighteningly majestic swing of Mjolnir, the immortal vanished heading home to see his own father.

Harry entered the mansion, and quietly made his way through the halls. He hadn't informed his father of what was happening, but the idea that the man didn't know was laughable. The more he thought about the representative from the Embassy at his hearing, the less likely it was that Tony Stark was ignorant of what was going on. His first thought of the Grangers involvement fell apart when he realized that the representative had been a Wizard himself. How likely was it that the Grangers
would know that there was a magical component to the US's diplomatic mission when Harry himself hadn't known?

The door to his father's study was open. That could only mean that Tony was uncharacteristically home during the day. Which meant he knew about the troubles Harry had been through in Scotland, and he knew that Harry hadn't come to him for help, instead going to others.

Crap.

Harry presented himself at the door and knocked on the frame.

Tony Stark was sitting at his desk, he looked up at the knock, and smiled broadly, and he rose from his desk and pulled his son into an embrace. The man then guided his son to the leather sofa next to his desk.

"So, why Thor and not me?"

Harry developed an intense interest in his shoes. "They wouldn't have allowed you to speak; the backward laws of that culture barely recognize non-magic users as human. The only way you would have gotten into the court room would have been to armor up and bust a lot of heads. Stephen and Mistress Harkness are both officially wanted criminals by their laws, so the same applied to them. Wanda would have had to throw a bit of power around to, because she's a woman and doesn't use the right kind of magic. Hercules would have broken heads on general principle; Sersi would have transfigured everyone in the courtroom. Thor is a magical person who is both intimidating enough to scare the bejeezus out of them and level headed enough to not actually kill anyone."

"I can't fault your logic in that, especially since it worked. But Harry, I knew about what was going on from the third day after they took your tech. You have some very good friends in Padma and Hermione. They got word to their parents, who got word to me. I was the one who got the Government involved. By the way, the British Prime Minister and Her Majesty the Queen are both sending you official apologies, and from what I hear, the Queen will be having a few select words with 'The Queen's Wizard' which is the Minister of Magic's official title." He reached out and lifted Harry's face to look at him. "Don't hide things from me Harry. You are an accomplished young man, but your old man can still help, if only a little, besides," Tony Stark smiled broadly "If they had been foolish enough to actually try to keep you away from me, they would find out just how well my toys work around magic."

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August 12 1989:

The Stark Estate:

Nine year old Harry Potter was having the time of his life. Hanging out with Hank and Simon was more fun than anyone should be allowed to have. Truly those two big people were as much kids as he was or Franklin was. Ah, there it was. Dad's lab. All kinds of great stuff was in there... Maybe a surprise or two for his baby-sitters. A grin fixed on his face Harry started working on the door.

He thought about what Mistress Harkness had told him about his magic, that it was nothing more than an extension of his intent. Harry liked his stern tutor a lot. She was strict, her lessons sometimes made him think that his brain was going to liquefy and pour out his ears, but unlike so many of the other adults he had to deal with she never, ever spoke down to him.

But just intending for the door to open wasn't good enough. There were far too many safeguards on
the door; instead he was going to try to do what Wanda did. He was going to try to have his magic affect probabilities. If it worked, the door would open all by its self. Harry placed his hands on the door and focused on the possibility of the door opening, causing his magic to flow within him as he had been taught, Harry unleashed it into the door.

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Six A.M. the morning after his return from Hogwarts, Harry was out on the grounds beside the Walnut tree he and Franklin had built a tree fort in when they were seven. He really loved this old tree, so many happy memories of nights spent in the fort, plotting the days when they would be costumed adventurers like their parents, oh and the horrible code names they had chosen, though the names paled next to the color blind monstrosities they had designed as their future costumes.

Harry worked his way through his morning stretches, just as he'd been taught

"Morning Trooper."

Harry's heart soared. He wasn't sure how this man would react to his failure to assimilate in his birth parent's culture. That he was here now told Harry that the Captain didn't hate him for his failure.

"Morning Steve."

"Since it's been a while since we had a decent work out, I thought we'd start out light today…"

Oh oh. A light work out for Steve Rogers would cripple most people.

"Let's start with a three mile run" the living legend continued, "Then maybe an hour of aikido, just to see what kind of shape you're in." With that the man began his run, setting a pace for a five minute mile. He maintained that pace for the entire run.

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Following the morning workout, Steve joined Harry for a light breakfast.

"Not bad, you've gotten your wind back since your injuries and your katas aren't too bad… a bit slow and sloppy, but I'm writing that off to not having anyone to spar against. You haven't forgotten how to fall. I think we'll have you back up to speed in a few weeks"

Harry nodded. He knew that 'up to speed' was achieving a level of physical conditioning that would qualify him to excel at any sport offered for his age group, or with a little effort, to be able to hand Steve his towel after he finished HIS work out.

"So." Rogers said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Harry hesitated. "I screwed up. I didn't get the job done."

"Really? I've been over what Tony said happened, it seems to me you did alright."

"I'm supposed to do better. There's a prophecy…"

"Ah, more of your hocus pocus. I don't believe in fortune tellers."

"As I recall, you didn't believe in magic either." Harry grinned.

"Point." The blond man considered that for a moment. "What does this prophecy say exactly?"
"I don't know, really. The seer contacted me and told me that thousands would die if I didn't return to Britain."

Rogers straightened in his seat. "Tony didn't tell me about that."

"I didn't tell him. He has a harder time with magic than you do."

Rogers nodded. "What do you plan to do?"

The boy shook his head. "I don't know, I really don't. There are so many good people there, if my staying away is what kills them, I don't know if I could handle that, but at the same time, they want to control me, to force me to abandon Dad. I just can't do that."

"I don't have the answers you're looking for Harry. But if you want an old man's advice, go to your father and lay your cards out on the table. All of them. Then the two of you can work through what you need to do."

"I know… I should have done it from the beginning, but I was worried…"

"That he would forbid your going."

"Yeah. I never wanted to go there in the first place, but the prophecy… How could I ignore that? " Harry shook his head. "I don't know what to do."

"You've got a while before you need to decide anything." Steve sipped at his coffee. "Tomorrow we get back to basics… You aren't going to improve if I keep taking it easy with you."

Harry nodded while groaning inside. Tomorrow was going to hurt. A lot.

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The End of Term staff meeting ended as they always did, quiet celebration for the school surviving yet another year. The next morning the staff would be leaving for their holidays, the three whose contracts were expiring would decide to either sign up for another year or to move on. Dumbledore was confident that all three would remain, leaving him with only the Defense Against Dark Arts Instructor to replace (again).

The staff's disappointment in him over his handling of young Mr. Stark was more than evident. Stories of young Stark's episodes of 'civil disobedience' had been exchanged around the table by the staff, officially disapproving while smiling and shaking their heads in amusement.

"I really had thought I'd seen everything. I mean I lived through his father and his gang of miscreants, I've even had the Weasley twins, who aspire to succeed the Marauders as the school's premier pranksters, but the Stark boy…"

"The Muggles have a saying about idle hands." Severus Snape said, recalling his own childhood. "It was a mistake to remove the boy's focus. Prior to his… tantrum, his work was… adequate."

Filius Flitwick smirked into his mug. For Severus Snape to describe any Ravenclaw's work as 'adequate' was tantamount to high praise in deed, to have him describe the son of James Potter in such a way….

Poppy Pomphrey cleared her throat. "Albus, is the boy coming back?"

The Headmaster's silence spoke volumes.
August 12 1989:

The Stark Estate:

The door to his father's lab suddenly swung open. Cool, he could affect probabilities! Harry hopped up and down in excitement for a moment then entered the lab. There it was, the 'techvest' that dad had originally made to monitor his magic and it's affect on electronics. Then it had been used as a test bed for Dad's Powertap prototypes to see if Starktech could be powered by Harry's magic.

**Pulling off his shirt, Harry donned the techvest, and then set to attaching a few of the cool things that his dad had developed for it. Hank and Simon were never going to believe what his dad had come up with.**

Harry exited the lab, and the door sealed behind him. He then turned and ran down the hallway looking for his adult playmates. Barreling around the corner he ran full on into a man in an odd red and black bodysuit. As they both fell to the ground Harry heard the telltale 'fzzz-pop' sound of an electronic system being disrupted by his magic, and the intruder alarms of the manor began to sound.

"What the?" the confused intruder said. The manor's defensive systems began to deploy against the man. He scooped Harry into his arms and the Intruder Defense AI was confused by the signs of a known being superimposed over the unknown causing the weapons systems to lock in safe mode. The intruder alarms continued to sound.

"I came for Stark's tech." The man in red and black rasped in Harry's ear. "But I'll settle for Stark's kid. I'm sure he'll sell me his toys to get you back."

"One moment Miss…Harry!"

Coming in from his morning run, Harry heard Jarvis' call as he was exiting the kitchen and returned to take the phone, mouthing 'thank you' to his man who was like a favorite uncle.

"Harry Stark."

"HARRY!"

"Hello Hermione, it's good to hear your voice. Just home from school?"

"Yes, Padma's here with me."

"Hi Harry!" came Padma's lilting voice.

"Padma, it's good to hear you as well."

"It's weird not being able to see you like if we used a floo."

"Harry, this is horribly expensive and Mum gave me a time limit, we just called to tell you that everyone was worried about you. Neville said to tell you that he couldn't handle all us girls by himself"

"Which one of you hit him for that?"
"I did." Padma said with a giggle in her voice.

"Good, wouldn't want him getting too comfortable."

"Are you coming back Harry?"

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Kristine Granger looked over the rim of her teacup at her daughter and her friend and sighed.

A friend who was spending the night. This was new; Hermione had never had friends that were close enough to spend the night. Somehow it seemed odd that this pair of twelve year olds would have bonded so closely with a boy

"Are you coming back Harry?" Hermione asked.

The pair crowded the telephone handset listening intently.

"Well, you'd better write you prat." Padma said. "We've got a boat load of homework this summer and we'll need someone to feel superior too."

"You too Harry. You've got my number. You'd better call." Hermione said adding to the conversation that Kristine could only hear one side of.

"Bye Harry." Padma said.

"Goodbye." Hermione added before hanging up the phone.

The two girls looked at the telephone wistfully.

"Well done ladies." Kristine said. "Under five minutes."

"Harry said that he'd call next time, when a few of us can get together near a phone." Hermione said.

"So, is he coming back?" Kristine asked.

"He doesn't know." Hermione said with her voice cracking.

"I think he wants to, but…” Padma continued. "He doesn't know if he can trust the Headmaster and the Wizengamot."

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On the morning of August 10th there was a loud crack sound twelve meters in front of the front door to the Manor of the Stark estate and two people suddenly appeared from no where. Almost as soon as they materialized alarms sounded and weapons systems deployed.

The smaller of the pair moved as if to draw a weapon.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." The dry voice of Edwin Jarvis came from all sides of the intruders. "Producing a weapon or something that the defensive systems would take as a weapon will cause you much pain."

"I am Professor Minerva McGonagall, the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."
"I'm sure you are madam. Does your school not teach the basic protocols of good manners such as calling ahead to request an audience?"

The woman colored. "I am unused to such treatment sir."

"Indeed?" Jarvis answered. "We are unused to having associates of kidnappers suddenly appearing on our lawn. Please state your business so that you may leave."

"We only want to speak with Harry Potter." The woman's companion said, speaking for the first time.

The door to the manor opened and Harry stepped out. "That's too bad sir, because there is no Harry Potter here. As I've told you people many times my name is Harry Stark. Good Morning Professor. And you are sir?"

"Merlin, you look just like James. My name is Sirius Black, Harry, I'm your Godfather."

"The same Sirius Black imprisoned for assisting in the murder of my birth parents and for the murder of one of my birth parent's best friends and a dozen or so mundanes? You'll forgive me sir if I'm something less than thrilled to meet you."

"Harry, please, we need to speak with you on a serious matter." Minerva said.

"We aren't doing this on the front lawn Professor, nor are you speaking with me without my father being present. You can come back after seven pm tonight, my father will be home then and you will be able to have your say. For now, get off my father's property."

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August 12 1989:

The Stark Estate:

Harry was shocked that the man in black and red would be like this. Being around his father and his father's friends had almost allowed him to forget what he thought of as 'The Bad Times' when his aunt and uncle and cousin would hurt him for no reason. Well, no more. Steve had taught him lots of things, several of them were suppose to hurt big people. Time to see if he had actually learned anything in his morning lessons.

With calm deliberation he drove the thumb of his right hand into the left eyehole of the man's mask.

-ooo000ooo-…

Lucius Malfoy was a man on a mission, a mission assigned by his master more than a decade before.

"Lucius" The Dark Lord had said. "My victory is assured. However there are powerful forces aligned against me." He handed Lucius a small book. Malfoy recognized it to be a Muggle diary. "This is a great prize Lucius. If I disappear and you are unable to find me for a decade, take this and arrange for it to be placed in the hands of a pureblood child starting their first year at Hogwarts. A young girl would be best as few boys that age would ever keep a diary. It is important that the book be used. This will bring me back to you."

Lucius held the small book in his hand now and swept through Diagon Alley looking for a likely recipient. Ah, there. Perfect…
Minerva McGonagall perched primly on the sofa looking at her host over the rim of her teacup. The elder Stark radiated power. Not magic, but the charisma of a man who got things done, very like Albus, yet in a very different way. A very subdued Sirius Black sat next to her, while Harry sat next to his father with an expression of mistrust fixed upon his features. On the other side of Harry sat Agatha Harkness wearing an expression of vast disappointment while looking at her several greats Grand Niece.

"So" Tony Stark said. "Why are you here and why shouldn't I have you thrown out?"

"Mr. Stark, we are here to offer both Harry and yourself the apologies of the staff of Hogwarts for the actions of our Headmaster and the Wizengamot for what was attempted last May. What they attempted was unforgivable."

"Yet you have forgiven them." Observed the Billionaire.

"Albus Dumbledore is a great man, but still a just man, one who makes mistakes. Some of us follow the greatness in him."

"And what of you Mr. Black?" Harry fixed the older man with a stare. "How is it you are out of prison?"

"Evidence exonerating me was found. It showed that, as I always said, Peter Pettigrew was the traitor and the one who killed the Muggles."

"And this evidence was discovered by…” Harry paused, "Albus Dumbledore?"

"How did you know that?"

"Ah, how very convenient. Harry slips from his control, and suddenly the Headmaster discovers evidence exonerating Harry's Godfather, just in time to have him released so that he could accompany young Minerva to convince the lad to return to school." Agatha shook her head. "Manipulation upon manipulation. Didn't anyone ask why he didn't find what ever he found a decade ago? He let you sit in that cell for all that time because he didn't NEED you Mr. Black."

Both McGonagall and Black blinked as they made the associations.

"Albus was rather driven in his late teens when he sought me out." Agatha noted. "Even then he was so convinced he was right in every situation. It seems he has gotten worse."

"Mr. Black," Harry was starting to feel sorry for the older wizard. "You tell me that you are my Godfather. I'm afraid that I'm not really sure what that means."

"Please, call me Sirius. My being your Godfather means that your parents entrusted me in guiding you through life in their absence."

"Mr. Black, please take no offense, but I have a father to give me that guidance. While I'm grateful to Lily and James Potter for my life, I have no memories of them, nor any emotional attachment to them. I don't know what circumstances kept you from me when I needed you, nor do I understand why I was left with as abusive a family as the Dursleys, but I was. I'm sorry sir, but you cannot just appear when it's convenient to Albus Dumbledore to have you guide me. I am not lost."

"Harry," Minerva McGonagall interrupted, "Lily's sacrifice allowed you to defeat the worst Dark Lord in living memory, you cannot abandon…"
"Surely you don't subscribe to that nonsensical story Professor." Harry shook his head.

"Mr. Stark!"

"As I pointed out to Professor Flitwick, there was exactly one survivor of that encounter. Me. I have no idea what happened. The history books tell us that the bodies of Lily and James Potter were found, dead by the killing curse. Voldemort's body was determined to be disintegrated by the same magical force that destroyed the cottage we lived in. I was found with this curse scar, that everyone knows was caused by the unstoppable, unsurvivable, kills without marking the body every time it's tried, Killing Curse. Occam's razor tells me that someone is looking to sell someone something with that story."

The two visitors from Hogwarts blinked at the reference to someone's razor, not understanding the reference.

"Mr. Stark, the fact remains that you did survive something that should have killed you, if not the exchange of magic, then at very least the event that destroyed your parent's home. You are a symbol to many people of the light can achieve. Surely you aren't willing to turn your back on them?"

Harry did not respond, rather he continued to stare vacantly at the Transfiguration teacher.

"Harry, are you alright?" his father asked. Harry didn't respond in anyway.

Moving at a speed that belied her years, Agatha Harkness moved to look deeply into Harry's eyes, and gasped. "Harry's not here. He's in an out of body event."

The room erupted into chaos.

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Harry found himself on a featureless plain tinted in reds and purples. Sitting in front of him on a black throne like chair was a woman.

Clad in a black flowing gown with red highlights in spider motif, the grey haired woman's eyes were covered with a red band of fabric. She turned her face to face him.

"Good evening Mr. Stark."

"Good evening to you Madame Webb. Is this strictly necessary? I was in a meeting."

The woman nodded. "I know Mr. Stark. The signs pointed to your making a decision. I thought it wise to speak with you before you did so."

"Last year you convinced me to attend Hogwarts telling me that if I did not return to Britain thousands would die. I returned, and the arrogant wizards attempted to take me away from my father."

"As you recall, I told you that your way would be difficult no matter which path you chose. This continues to be so. All of your futures are now clearer to me. You are fated to face the man who killed your birth parents. All of your paths lead to such a confrontation. I still cannot see the outcome of that confrontation, as the two of you both employ far too many chaotic enchantments for me to see through. Your only options will be where this confrontation takes place, and how many die before you face each other."

"That can't be right. That man died."
"No Mr. Stark, he did not. His body was destroyed, but he lives on. You actually met him last year when he was possessing one of your teachers. He was the one who loosed the troll into your school."

Quirrell! Harry thought. That explained the 'other entity' his tech suit had detected.

"And what is my best path?" He asked.

"Best is subjective Mr. Stark. The path with the fewest deaths involves your returning to Hogwarts. Following that path you will confront your parent's murderer in three years."

"And if I stay here?"

"You will still confront him, but not until after he has consolidated his power in Britain, and in doing so liquidated those who do not fit in his view of blood purity." She grimaced. "None of your friends from school would survive."

Harry closed his eyes, and nodded. "Send me back."

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Harry opened his eyes to find his father's worried face looking down at him.

"Are you alright Harry?"

Harry glanced around; he was in his room, away from the visitors from Hogwarts. "I've got to go back." He whispered.

"Why?"

"I told you about the seer, Madame Webb Dad, she just 'spoke' with me. The Wizard who killed my birth parents is still out there, I'm the only one who can face him according to her. If I stay here, I still end up facing him, but only after he murders his way through the UK."

Tony considered that for a moment. "I hate magic. How reliable is this seer? I couldn't find out much about her other than Spiderman said she was helpful on occasion."

"I can't explain it Dad, but she knows. Really, she just knows."

The Elder Stark's mouth set itself to a hard like. "I don't like it. I'll talk to Agatha; you aren't going back if I can't get some guarantees."

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August 12 1989:

The Stark Estate:

The man in red and black screamed when Harry's thumb drove into his eye and dropped the boy.

Harry hit the floor taking the impact on his butt like Steve had taught him, rolling to stand in front of the man.

"A sure way to get a man's attention is to go for the crotch" Steve had told him, "But in our business most of the major players protect themselves there. But almost no one protects the other
vulnerable spots. If you can't reach his eyes, take out his knees."

Harry launched a side kick at the screaming man's left knee, shattering the man's kneecap. Harry over extended the kick and fell as the man crumpled to the ground. Harry quickly crabbed away from the man then rolled to his feet maintaining his guard.

Attracted by the Alarms and near panicked by the screams Hank and Simon rushed to Harry's side.

"Spymaster? My god Harry, are you alright?" The furry man scooped the boy up.

"Your fur tickles!" the boy giggled. "Steve was right, bad guys are stupid around kids."

Simon Williams picked the whimpering man off the floor by his neck. "Idiot." Wonder Man said carrying the man to the holding facility to await the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents that the alarms had called. "Three people in the mansion and you picked on the one Captain America taught to fight."

…-ooo000ooo-…

Hermione Granger looked up from her notes when the phone rang. She had finished all her summer assignments by the third week of the holidays, but it never hurt to review. She had been going with her parents to their surgery most days this summer, using one of their offices as to study, but most Fridays (like today) she remained at home, sometimes going to Padma's or Hannah's. Today however she was just spending a quiet day at home.

She picked up the phone on its third ring. "Granger Residence." She said matter of factly.

"Hello Hermione." Came a voice she had come to know well.

"Harry, how are you?"

"I just thought I'd call to let you know I'll be seeing you on the train on the first."

In a small township in the state of New York, a young man was almost deafened by a sudden squeal of happiness.

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Character profiles:

Chapter 7.

In order of appearance

**Hank** – Hank McCoy PhD. Biochemistry. PhD Genetics. PhD Physics. M. D. Large man, covered with Blue fur, his feet are as dexterous as his hands, very strong, very agile, and very fast. Most commonly associated with the X-men using his imaginative codename "Beast" He spent several years with the Avengers

**Simon** – Simon Williams. At the time of the story, Simon Williams uses the Codename Wonder Man. His body is permeated with 'ionic energy' He is very strong, extremely resilient, for all intents and purposes immortal. Works as an actor/stuntman (being indestructible makes the most extreme stunts somewhat risk free.) His major acting credit to this point in time was as a sidekick (and principle straightman/victim) of a children's television Host ala Sideshow Mel to Krusty the Clown. His best friend Hank McCoy reminds him of this (and his multiple pie-in-the-face moments) all the time.
Thor – Thor Odinson, Norse God of Thunder. Immortal, very strong, speaks for no adequately explained reason in Shakespearian Prose. Carries the enchanted battle mallet Mjolnir always returns to his hand when thrown. No one unworthy of being Thor can lift Mjolnir.

Tony Stark - Billionaire industrialist, Genius level IQ, if it can be made, he's got 2. If it can't be made, he's only got the prototype. Secretly (at the time of the story) Ironman. The Ironman Armor is form fitting Mech, with flight capabilities (ground to orbit with auxiliary boosters) near infinite defensive capabilities, many many offensive capabilities.

Steve – Steve Rogers also know as Captain America. Most specifically someone you do NOT want to get in a fight with. Powers: None. He is the ultimate Soldier, created in the Early Years of WWII by exposure to the Super Soldier Formula and to an unspecified radiation.

The Seer – Cassandra Webb, also known as Madame Webb, suffered from a lifetime of blindness and many years of neurological deterioration due to myasthenia gravis, she compensated with her profound psychic abilities, establishing herself as a medium. Her appearances are usually associated with Spiderman/Spiderwoman, but on occasion assists other Heroes, Harry Stark for instance.

The Man in Red and Black – Sinclair Abbott also known as Spymaster, the third user of that name. An unpowered master thief and spy, utilizing a high tech stealth suit to infiltrate high security facilities and make 'impossible' heists.


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A/N: A few thoughts.

I continue to be amazed at the interest this story generates. It's amazing what has managed to grow out of a simple conversation on the Caer Azkaban news group. Several people have commented on the Iron Man movie, which I haven't seen yet, so I can't really speak to the similarities that some have mentioned, but thanks for the compliments.

The Techsuit from first year will be updated and modified for second year… how much remains to be revealed. Oh, to the feeb on DLP who claimed I was 'ripping off' Doc Octopus, Ironman prototypes had multiple manipulator arms as far back as the 60s. Octavious came first, but even he didn't invent the idea, look at Heinlein's Waldo Inc. for the source material.

Many thanks to those who liked the Garfield joke in chapter 7. I'm unaware of a Garfield/HP cross though that might be amusing…

Many have asked if I was taking current events like Marvel's Civil War into account. No. As far as I'm concerned the fork in the realities happened when the Dursleys made the business trip. The Marvels are as they were in 1986. Tony's involvement with Harry headed off his alcoholism and his falling out with Rhodey, Warmachine is part of the Stark Universe and Tony's (and Harry's) friend. The Onslaught crossover should be occurring during Harry's sixth year but considering all that entails (Tony dying and being replaced by a time traveling 16 year old version of himself for examples) I'm not sure if I'm going to pay attention to it.

Thanks for the reviews.
Harry Potter and The Invincible TechnoMage

Chapter Nine – Year Two Back to School

May 18 1990:

New York City

The Avengers Mansion:

Harry watched wide eyed as Mistress Harkness guided Wanda through her exercises.

"Focus on your body Wanda, focus on your power, feel the flow within you." The ancient woman was in full teacher mode. The young mutant woman was moving slowly through movements of her body and limbs. Those movements reminded Harry of the aikido katas Steve had taught him. Quietly in the back of the room Harry began to emulate Wanda's movements, trying to follow Mistress Harkness's instructions. From somewhere deep in his chest he felt the beginnings of a flow of power, like when his magic was just starting to work, but somehow different.

This was so cool. Everyone would be so impressed if he could do what Wanda did…

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Harry grimaced as the gel started to set around him. "Go limp, just float" sounded like an easy thing to do, but he was realizing that not moving for several hours wasn't going to be as easy as it had sounded in the kitchen this morning.

Nirvana was cranking in the headphones, Harry focused on looking into himself to do his daily exercises as prescribed by Mistress Harkness. Trying to change the flow of his magic without moving was exhausting; mostly because of how intimately magic was tied to your physical body.

There was a click and the music was gone.

"How can you listen to that? You can't even understand the words."

"I don't want to hear music criticism from someone from the generation whose musical tastes was defined by disco. After all, it's 1992 and disco still sucks." Harry said, thinking how odd the facemask made his voice sound. "You know of course that yelling 'turn that noise down' is the first, best sign of old age right?"
"Young whippersnappers." Tony groused good naturedly. "When I was your age we didn't get our biotech interfaces auto constructed by nanobots in a nutrient gel, no we had to do it the old fashioned way, with servo interfaces, magnetics and transistors, hand soldered with acid based flux."

"Yeah, right. And you hiked five miles to school, through waist high snow, uphill both ways. The only place you ever played with discrete transistors was when you disassembled old radios when you were younger than me. Is this going to take much longer? I mean I know the Nanos are far too small for me to feel, but I swear I think I can feel them swarming all over my body and it's kind of creepy."

"Sorry kiddo, that's psychological, nothing I can do about that. As far as the Nanos go, I'm showing that they are having trouble dealing with your magic, but the computer is learning from their mistakes and projects another two hours to complete the interface. Techsuit Mk 4 looks good. If you find another troll this year you shouldn't have any problems with it."

"The computer projects two hours, which means it will be at least three. Wonderful." Inside his mask, Harry grinned. "You know in the movie, they'll show this as a montage with an inspirational soundtrack, so that it would look cool and not be boring."

"You think there will be a movie about your life?"

"Sure, of course they'll show you as all heroic and stuff, not the aging music hater you are, always yelling at kids to turn down their music and to stay off your lawn."

"And you of course, will be the star."

"That goes without saying." Harry resisted the urge to scratch his shoulder. "The actor would have to be some fresh new unknown of course."

"Of course." Tony smiled. "But you would need some established star power to pull the audience into the theater, who do you suggest would play me?"

"Hmm. It would have to be an actor that could carry off your personality… I wonder if Burt Reynolds would be willing to leave his television show?"

Tony almost did a spit take. "Burt Reynolds? He's at least twenty years older than I am."

"He'd only be a bit player in the back ground Dad; still, I guess you're right, I just can't see him complaining about someone's music. There's that Robert Downey guy from Chaplin… I could see him doing you."

"I've always thought that my character could only be captured by an actor of quality." Jarvis said having entered the room to bring Tony some paperwork that had been delivered. "Michael Caine perhaps."

"I can't see Michael Caine as a Gentlemen's Gentleman Jarvis." Harry said from the gel tank. "Besides, knowing Hollywood, they'd probably just have your character be the AI for Dad's home computer and have J.A.R.V.I.S. be a silly acronym for something."

Jarvis left the lab laughing at the concept of his responsibilities to the Stark home being relegated to an AI.

"What about Pepper?"

"Oh, I don't know." Harry was starting to itch all over his body as he imagined he could feel the Nanos crawling all over him. "Someone like Marilu Henner."
"Merilu Henner? From Taxi?" That selection had surprised Tony. "Isn't she a little old to play Pepper?"

Harry shrugged, forgetting that he shouldn't be moving and that Tony couldn't really see him in the tank. "I don't know, is she? I didn't really think of that."

Tony smiled. Imagining what Pepper's reaction might be when he told her what their boy had said. He reached out and turned Harry's music back on.

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After the Nanobots were finally finished, (the total time in the gel tank was 5 hours 9 minutes.) Harry treated himself to the longest hottest shower of his life. He was completely aware that there was no way he had actually felt the Nanos, but he imagined the sensation of millions of tiny pincers and claws all over his body. His dad had said that he would have to wait until the next day to start on the calibrations of the new interface.

Exiting from his bath naked save for the towel he was rubbing his hair with, he stopped suddenly when he spotted a small creature sitting on his bed. Harry managed not to shout, but it was a close thing. The little creature on the bed had large, bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls.

The creature slipped off the bed and bowed so low that the end of its long, thin nose touched the carpet. Harry noticed that it was wearing what looked like an old pillowcase, with rips for arm-and-leg-holes.

"Um… hello," said Harry uncertainly.

"Harry Potter!" said the creature, in a high-pitched voice that Harry found oddly disturbing. No, this was not a creature, but a being. Nothing that could hold an intelligent conversation was a creature. "So long has Dobby wanted to meet you, sir… Such an honor it is…"

"Thank you, but my name is Harry Stark now." said Harry, wrapping the towel around his waist. He wondered how the being had managed to get inside the mansion without setting off the alarms. He would have to check the building telemetry to see where the sensors had gone wrong. He wanted to ask, "What are you?" but that would be a bit rude, instead he asked, "Who are you?"

"Dobby, sir. Just Dobby. Dobby the house-elf," said the small being.

"Not that I'm not pleased to meet you Dobby," said Harry quickly, "but, why are you here?"

"Oh, yes, sir," Dobby said nodding earnestly. "Dobby has come to tell you, sir… it is difficult, sir… Dobby wonders where to begin…"

"Sit down," said Harry politely, pointing at the bed.

The elf burst into tears "S-sit down!" he wailed. "Never… never ever…"

Harry was horrified. Trespasser or not, this little elf didn't seem to mean any harm. He decided then to get this situation recorded. He hit the switch that turned on the recording suite for his room.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, "I didn't mean to offend…"

"Offend Dobby!" the elf sputtered. "Dobby has never been asked to sit down by a wizard… like an equal…"
Harry escorted Dobby back onto the bed where the elf sat hiccuping, looking like nothing more than a large and very ugly monster action figure. At last the little being managed to control himself, and sat with his large eyes fixed on Harry in an expression of tearful adoration.

"It's just common decency Dobby. You probably haven't met all that many well-mannered wizards," said Harry.

The Elf shook his head. Then he leapt up and started banging his head furiously on the window frame, shouting, "Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!"

"Don't do that! Why are you hurting yourself?" Harry hissed, springing up and pulling Dobby back onto the bed.

"Dobby had to punish himself, sir," said the elf, shaking his head again, having gone slightly cross-eyed. "Dobby almost spoke ill of his family, sir…"

"Your family? I don't understand Dobby. Why would your family care if you speak with me?"

"The wizard family Dobby serves, sir… Dobby is a house-elf — bound to serve one house and one family forever…"

"Do they know you're here?" asked Harry curiously.

Dobby shuddered.

"Oh, no, sir, no… Dobby will have to punish himself most sternly for coming to see you, sir. Dobby will have to shut his ears in the oven door for this. If they ever knew, sir —"

"But won't they notice if you shut your ears in the oven door?"

"Dobby doubts it, sir. Dobby is always having to punish himself for something, sir. Dobby just gets on with it, sir, my family does not care. Sometimes they reminds me to do extra punishments…"

"But why don't you leave? Run away?"

"A house-elf must be set free, sir. And the family will never set Dobby free… Dobby will serve the family until he dies, sir…"

Harry stared. "Can anyone help you? Can I help you?"

Almost at once, Harry wished he hadn't said that. Dobby dissolved again into wails of gratitude.

"Harry Potter asks if he can help Dobby… Dobby has heard of your greatness, sir, but of your goodness, Dobby never knew…"

Harry, blushed, "Harry Stark, Dobby. People say a lot of things about me Dobby, don't believe any of it." Harry moved his chair until he was almost nose to nose with the elf. "Why did you come here Dobby? Did you have something to tell me? Or ask me?"

"Harry Potter is humble and modest," said Dobby reverently, "Harry Potter speaks not of his triumph over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named…"

"Voldemort?" said Harry.

Dobby clapped his hands over his ears and moaned, "Do not speak the name, sir! Do not speak the name!"
"Sorry," said Harry quickly. "I know lots of people don't like it."

"Harry Potter is valiant and bold! He has braved so many dangers already! He is not afraid of the Name. But Dobby has come to protect Harry Potter, to warn him, even if he does have to shut his ears in the oven door later… Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts."

"I don't understand." Harry said. "I'm going back. It's… necessary."

"No, no, no," squeaked Dobby, shaking his head, his ears flapping. "Harry Potter must stay where he is safe. He is too great, too good, to lose. If Harry Potter goes back to Hogwarts, he will be in mortal danger."

"Why?" said Harry in surprise.

"There are those who conspire, Harry Potter. They plot to make most terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year," whispered Dobby, suddenly wobbly. "Dobby has known it for months, sir. Harry Potter must not put himself in risk. He is too important, sir!"

"What terrible things?" Harry asked. "Who are the plotters?"

Dobby made a funny choking noise and then banged his head hysterically against the wall.

"Ok, ok, you can't tell me. I understand!" cried Harry, grabbing the elf's arm to stop him. "But why are you warning me?" A sudden, unpleasant thought struck him. "Hang on… this hasn't got anything to do with Vol… sorry… with You-Know-Who, has it? You could just shake or nod," he added hastily as Dobby's head tilted worryingly close to the wall again.

Slowly, Dobby shook his head.

"Not — not He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, sir —"

But Dobby's eyes were wide and he seemed to be trying to give Harry a hint. Harry, however, was completely lost.

"Well, that's good… He doesn't have a brother, does he?"

Dobby shook his head, his eyes wider than ever.

"Thank you for your warning Dobby, but I can't run away. There are things I must do."

"Harry Potter must not return to school!" The elf said and vanished.

Well that was odd. Harry got dressed then set out to find his father. This visit merited discussion.

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May 18 1990:

New York City

The Avengers Mansion:

*Harry continued emulating the exercises that Mistress Harkness was guiding Wanda through. He could feel the new magic in his chest, just a tickle. It was very like his normal magic that Mistress Harkness had taught him to control years before, but despite the similarities, this kind of magic was*
Harry turned his attention into himself, focusing on the tickle of power. Using his magic he grasped the tickle and then he, for lack of better terms, pulled on it. The tickle grew in strength, becoming a throb in his chest and a tingle all up and down his arms.

Frightened, Harry attempted to push the throbbing back down. His magic took hold of the sensation in his body, but whatever it was twisted free. The dull throb grew into a painful pounding in his chest, and the tingling in his arms felt like the blood in his veins had turned to acid.

Harry gasp of pain caught the attention of Wanda and Agatha Harkness. They watched as the boy staggered backwards into the wall, a look of panic on his face… Harry's eyes went totally white when his pupils suddenly faded from view and he slumped to the ground convulsing. Harry’s last conscious thought noted that the pounding in his chest was so very hot, and his arms were on fire.

The Chaos was unleashed when the boy lost consciousness. Unleashed straight up, the arcane energy erupted from the boy's body and left the mansion, slicing through four floors, destroying everything in its path.

Witnesses on the street took note that a section of the Avengers Mansion was destroyed… again. Several of the tourists on the street marked the occasion by snapping photographs. Native New Yorkers, as is their wont, ignored the situation entirely. The destruction of that particular piece of property had lost all of its novelty long ago.

"Remember where we parked." Kristine Granger said as she led the two girls toward the International Arriving Flights terminal at London City Airport.

During the ride to the airport, Padma had asked a running string of questions about what an airport was like. Hermione did her best to answer all those questions, happy to be, for once, the one with the cultural answers.

"What time is Harry due to arrive Hermione?" Padma asked as they entered the terminal.

"In about ten minutes." Hermione studied the monitor showing the arriving flights. "Mum, there's no listing for Harry's flight."

"That's because Harry isn't using a commercial flight dear," Kristine Granger said. "His father has arranged a private flight. Tony said that we should meet Harry outside the Customs area."

Padma looked around amazed at the turmoil of a modern Muggle airport. "So many people"

"It seems wasteful for Harry to use a private plane." Hermione said, wondering just when her mother started calling Harry's dad by his first name.

"It's not so much an airplane as a VTOL capable, hypersonic suborbital lifting body Hermione." Harry's voice came from behind Hermione.

"Harry!" Padma squealed before lunging at her classmate.

"You snuck up on me!" Hermione spun on her classmate. "You know I hate that.." she then glared at Padma who was hugging Harry. "How can I yell at him properly when you're doing that?"

"Oh get over yourself Hermione!" Padma said hugging Harry harder. "It's good to see you you prat."
She released the hug and was immediately replaced by her Muggle born friend. "We've missed you."

"I'll yell at you later Harry. Padma's right, phone calls aren't the same as seeing you."

Harry Stark blushed. "I missed you guys too." He stepped back and gestured for a Brunette woman in a conservative business suit to step forward. "This is Ms. Jennifer Walters. Dad couldn't make it due to some meetings; Ms. Walters agreed to come with me to keep me out of trouble."

The two girls greeted the woman then returned to Harry.

The Brunette smiled shaking her head. She extended her hand to Kristine. "Jennifer Walters."

"Kristine Granger." Smiling Hermione's mother shook the offered hand.

"They're so young to be that close…"

"We've noticed." Kristine shook her head. "We've had family meetings about it, the Patils, the Abbots, the Bones and my husband and I… We've discussed our daughters relationships with Harry and the Longbottom boy. We think they're really just friends. For now anyway."

The two women watched the children for a moment. "So, you're his body guard?"

"Pretty much. Tony couldn't make it himself. He had commitments to be somewhere that was scheduled before it was decided that Harry would return to school. I was asked to make sure he made it on the train."

"You'll forgive me if I ask, but are you REALLY a body guard? You don't seem to be overly… frightening."

The Brunette smiled, Kristine's inner dentist noticed the other woman's perfect teeth. "Appearances can be deceiving"

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It was quickly decided to get Harry's school shopping out of the way on the way to the Granger's home.

Harry smiled at Jennifer's reaction to Diagon Alley. The wide eyed look was unusual for her. Evidently she hadn't seen 'everything' quite yet.

A quick stop at Madam Malkin's for alterations to last years robes and various new items of clothing Harry needed, the apothecary for the required ingredients for 2nd year potions, then lunch at Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor. Jennifer raved about the quality of the food, and Fortescue himself gushed over her.

Following their meal they headed for Flourish and Blotts. As they approached the book store, they saw a large crowd jostling outside the doors, trying to get in. The reason for this was proclaimed by a large banner stretched across the upper windows:

**GILDEROY LOCKHART**

*Will be signing copies of his autobiography MAGICAL ME today 12:30P. 4:30P.M.*

"We can actually meet him!" Hermione squealed. "I mean, he's written almost the whole booklist!"
Harry's cynical side had a healthy lack of respect for anyone as young as this 'Gilderoy Lockhart' appeared to be being egotistical enough to actually write an 'autobiography'. Something about the man preening in the animated photograph set Harry's teeth on edge. The group waited in the line until they could get into the shop. Once inside Harry pulled out his book list.

**SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS WILL REQUIRE:**

*The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2 by Miranda Goshawk*

*Break with a Banshee by Gilderoy Lockhart*

*Gadding with Ghouls by Gilderoy Lockhart*

*Holidays with Hags by Gilderoy Lockhart*

*Travels with Trolls by Gilderoy Lockhart*

*Voyages with Vampires by Gilderoy Lockhart*

*Wanderings with Werewolves by Gilderoy Lockhart*

*Year with the Yeti by Gilderoy Lockhart*

Having found the stacks of Lockhart books Harry looked up from his school list to the book in his hand. "Do you think this is real? What possible reason could anyone have to calling this glorified travelogue a text book?"

"Harry!" Hermione appeared to be scandalized. "I'm sure the professor has very good reasons for using these books!" Padma nodded her agreement with her bushy haired friend.

"We've both read through them Harry, they're amazing."

"Even so, think about it, this stupid list has seven books by this Lockhart guy, at four galleons each. Not a problem for my budget, or either of yours I assume, but what about the kids from families not as comfortable as ours?"

"I hadn't thought of that." The Muggle born witch said glancing at her mother and seeing a small look of disappointment in the older woman's eyes.

Their exchange was interrupted when Gilderoy Lockhart came slowly into view, taking his seat at a table surrounded by large pictures of his own face, all winking and flashing toothpaste advertisement dazzlingly white smiles at the crowd. The real Lockhart was wearing robes of forget-me-not blue that exactly matched his eyes; his pointed wizard's hat was set at a jaunty angle on his wavy hair.

Hermione and Padma both squealed like the school girls they were.
"Oh jeez, this guy looks like he should be in an infomercial selling some useless thing that no one would ever need." Harry said, rubbing his arm where Hermione had pressed her nails into his bicep.

Gilderoy Lockhart appeared to have heard him. He looked up, spotting Harry. The author stared, his eyes wide, almost calculating. Then he leapt to his feet and shouted theatrically, "Can you believe it? Harry Potter coming to see 'Magical Me'?"

The crowd parted, whispering excitedly; Lockhart dived forward, seized Harry's arm, and pulled him to the front. The crowd burst into applause. Harry's face flushed as Lockhart pulled him in front of the photographer, who was clicking away madly, wafting thick smoke over the crowd.

"Nice big smile, Harry," said Lockhart, through his own gleaming teeth. "Together, you and I are worth the front page."

Harry had had enough of this clown. Barely able to feel the fingers in his right hand, Harry attempted to pull away, but the adult wizard was too strong.

"Let me go."

Lockhart ignored him, still vamping for the crowd. Harry was seconds from activating the weapons of his Techsuit, when Lockhart suddenly yelped in pain.

Hermione, Padma and Kristine were all shocked to see Jennifer Walters holding Gilderoy Lockhart's left hand between her thumb and index finger.

"Mr. Lockhart, there are twenty-seven bones in the human hand." The diminutive brunette said. "For manhandling my young friend Harry, I have just broken your first metacarpal. If you let him go now, I'll leave the rest of them intact."

Lockhart released his grip on Harry. Jennifer smiled sweetly, and released hers on his hand. "In most parts of the world, what you did was assault Mr. Lockhart. Never touch Mr. Stark again."

Lockhart stared up at her, taking in her clothing. He had been hurt by a Muggle? His right hand sought out his wand, whipping it out to point at the small woman. In a smooth motion the tiny brunette backhanded the world famous Dark Hunter/Author across the room, where he collapsed in a pile of his own books.

Harry paid for his books and the party left the book store under the glare of Lockhart's fan club. Their shopping finished, they headed for the exit into the Leaky Cauldron.

"You were right." Kristine said to Jennifer as they passed out the door of the Leaky Cauldron to the London street.

"How was I right?"

"When I suggested that you didn't look all that dangerous, you told me appearances could be deceiving. When you're right, you're right."

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May 18 1990:

New York City

The Avengers Mansion:
The surprise that the two women felt when Harry suddenly unleashed a bolt of pure chaos froze them in their places for almost three seconds, then both reacted without thought of their own safety.

Agatha immediately set about damping down the energy pouring out of the boy's body by pouring her own into him, she managed to slow, but not stop the chaos energy.

Wanda's first action was to hit the communications panel next to the door to signal a medical emergency. That done the woman known as the Scarlet Witch joined her mentor at the boy's side. Lacking Mistress Harkness' level of sheer power, the Mutant turned magic user had a natural affinity for Chaos Magic. She set about pulling the raw chaos from the boy's body.

Neither woman spoke, yet worked together as if they performed these actions daily. It took almost three minutes to stop the energy cascade, and another minute for Wanda to draw the caustic magic from Harry's flesh.

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Tell me about Harry Potter.

Percy says that he changed his name. He's Harry Stark now.

He defeated a great Dark Lord and hides by changing his name?"

No, I don't think so. He was adopted and that's his new family's name.

Are these 'Starks' a powerful magical family?

The Twins say that Harry's family are Muggles... Though it is rumored that Harry's new father stormed into Hogwarts and intimidated Dumbledore over how the Headmaster dealt with the Troll getting into the castle.

How could that even be possible?

I don't know... We went shopping today.

Did you? What did you buy?

We got the week's groceries. I picked out the vegetables. The carrots were lovely, as was the kale. You know the lovely smell of a big pot of kale on the boil? That's all around me right now.

From within his diary Tom Riddle fumed. He was finding that getting information out of this empty headed girl and nigh on to impossible. It had taken most of a month just to ascertain that his other half had almost succeeded in their plans to dominate the Wizarding world, just to be stopped... killed? Eleven years before by a mere toddler named Potter.

He needed this girl to begin to pour her emotions and soul into his diary, with that finger hold he could set about taking control of her pitiful mind, but all he was getting was the minuitia of her life.

Still, that was probably for the best. If he assumed control before she started at Hogwarts that damnable Sorting Hat would see him and be in a position to alert Dumbledore of his presence.
Riddle had waited more than forty years for his chance. What were a few more days?

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Albus Dumbledore stared at the parchment in his hand in complete disbelief. School started in four days and his Defense Against the Dark Arts professor had just resigned. What was he going to do? Severus wanted the post, but why tempt fate? Besides, who would replace Severus in the dungeons? It would take more time than he had left to FIND Slughorn, much less the time needed to convince the man to return.

Perhaps Lockhart's unexplained withdrawal could be turned to an advantage. Dumbledore still chafed under the carefully worded Oaths to treat the Potter boy (and he would always be a Potter in Dumbledore's mind.) as nothing more than a student. Oh, he was trapped by his oath. Agatha Harkness had made very sure of that... but others…

Perhaps the best route to the boy would be through his blood family. The Evan's branch was utterly gone, as was the Potter branch. From Minerva, Dumbledore had discovered that young Harry had no emotional connection with Sirius Black, nor was he looking to create one. That left a single Marauder to forge an emotional tie.

Rising from his desk, Dumbledore crossed to the fireplace. He tossed in a pinch of floo powder, stuck his head into the suddenly green flames and said "Remus Lupin."

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May 21, 1990:

New York City

The Avengers Mansion:

Harry slowly woke. Pain was everything.

"He's coming around"

Harry cracked open his left eye to see Hank McCoy smiling down at him.

"Hey kid. You had us worried for a while there." The furry man said.

"What happened? What did I do wrong?" Harry rasped with a parched throat.

"Just a second Harry. Sip this."

A straw was placed at his lips. Harry sucked weakly, and was rewarded with some of the best tasting water he had ever had. The pain in his throat subsided, calling his attention to the pain on his chest and arms.

"What ever hocus pocus you did burned you badly Harry. I thought we were going to have to do skin grafts, but then some kind of crazy accelerated healing started almost like you were a junior league Logan. Agatha says it's your magic healing you. It doesn't seem to do much for the pain you're in though. I do know it seems to eat any pain killer we give you."

"It was the Chaos magic wasn't it? I hurt myself playing with a kind of magic I didn't understand."

Hank McCoy paused, then decided to tell his patient the truth. "Yes. Wanda said you tapped some
huge chaos source within you and lost control of it." Harry was taking this in a most subdued manner. "Here comes your Dad."

Tony Stark rushed to his son's bed. "Harry? How you feel kiddo?"

"Stupid. I was careless and stupid."

"I would agree that you were careless Harry." Tony cupped his boy's chin, raising it to look his son in the eye. "Not stupid. You don't have it in you to be stupid."

"He's healing at a phenomenal rate." McCoy said. "If he continues at this rate, he'll be up and around tomorrow, and completely healed in a week."

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Dinner at the Granger home was an informal affair consisting of simple yet tasty foods and conversation. The three adults and three children enjoyed their time at the table. When the meal was finished Harry dragged the girls into the kitchen to do the dishes.

"I never thought I'd have a millionaire's son washing my dishes," Kristine said with a small laugh.

"That's just Harry. In reality the Stark home is run pretty much like that. Tony has a staff, but each person is expected to clean up after themselves. I've seen bigwigs invited into the Stark home making the mistake of treating the staff like menial servants. That's a mistake that is rarely repeated because doing so almost guarantees no return invitations."

"Jennifer, I'm curious." Stuart Granger said, sipping at his glass of wine. "Kristine described what you did to day to that idiot in the book store. That didn't sound like any kind of martial art I've ever heard of. You mentioned being a lawyer, and you have something of an in-depth knowledge of the workings of the Stark household… You don't really fit the mold that I would think a 'body guard' would be like." He fixed the woman with a stare. "Who are you really? Are you using some kind of illusion?"

"Why Stuart, what a suspicious mind you have." Jennifer patted her mouth with her napkin to hide her smile. "What gave me away?"

"The third step on the stairs. It's on my list of things to fix around here. It creaks when I step on it, but not when Kristine or Hermione uses it. That tells me that the creak requires a certain amount of weight. You appear to be smaller than Kristine, but you caused the step to creak."

"Oh very good. It's always the simple things that trip you up." Jennifer smiled widely; she loved working around intelligent people. She touched something on her waist and… changed.

"Oh my." Kristine said, raising her hand to her mouth.

"For the record, I really am Jennifer Walters, and the image that was projected is actually what I look like when I don't look like this. It's just that I've been stuck like this for a year or so." She manipulated the device on her waist and the diminutive brunette returned. "On the plus side, I can wear any outfit I want and never spend a dime on clothes."

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Remus Lupin was pacing back and forth in his small apartment.

"What do you think I should do Padfoot?"
"I don't know Mooney; this whole situation has got me tied up in knots. The more I think about it, the more sense Harry made. Dumbledore left me to rot in Azkaban until he needed me. He got me out of that Hellhole to try and influence Harry."

Remus stopped pacing and threw himself into a threadbare chair. "I don't know how we were fooled for so long, looking at the whole situation now it's obvious that Albus has been manipulating us since 6th year." He shook his head. "His offer of employment is obviously a thinly veiled attempt to put me in a position to earn Harry's trust so that Dumbledore can influence the boy through me."

"But you would be near him. After you've got the job, you don't have to pass Dumbledore's influence on."

"Yes, I'd be near him… But should Jame's and Lily's boy be exposed to a Werewolf?"

"Remus, don't be a fool. Your name was his first word."

"Well, I thought he said 'Moonie', but Lily thought she heard 'Mummy'."

"Take the job Remus. If nothing else, you'll be near our boy."

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Laying in the bed he had been offered at the Grangers, Harry was staring at the ceiling, excited to be returning to Hogwarts. He wondered how long it would take him to get to sleep.

There was a quiet pop in the darkness, then suddenly a weight on his chest.

"Harry Potter has returned to England! Dobby told Harry Potter that he must not return to Hogwarts."

The elf was back. Harry groped to the side table to turn on the lamp.

"Hello Dobby."

"Hello Harry Potter. Harry Potter must not return to Hogwarts. If Harry Potter goes back to Hogwarts, he will be in mortal danger."

Giving up on the Elf ever understanding that he was no longer Harry Potter, Harry took the small being's hand. "Dobby, listen to me. I have to return."

The elf shook his head, his ears making an odd smacking noise as they flapped front to back. "If Harry Potter goes back to Hogwarts, he will be in mortal danger." He repeated.

"Dobby, please listen to me. There is a prophecy. It says that if I do not return, thousands will die. I cannot let that happen."

"Harry Potter is valiant and bold! He has braved so many dangers already! Now he takes on more to save us all."

"Dobby, please. I'm just doing what should be done."

"Harry Potter should be vigilant. If Harry Potter says he must return to Hogwarts, Dobby will help where he can."

"Thank you Dobby."
The elf vanished with a pop. Harry found himself wondering what was going to happen at the school. Knowing that he wouldn't be able to sleep for a while, Harry rose from the bed and began to run a series of diagnostics on his Techsuit. If something was going to happen, he might as well be very ready for it.

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May 27, 1990:

New York City

Stark Estate:

Hank McCoy had been right; Harry had healed completely within a week.

Harry was reflecting on his future. Walking about the estate he admitted to himself that he had survived only because Mistress Harkness and Wanda had been there to keep him from killing himself. Since coming to live with his Dad, he had truly been somewhat happy go lucky. Getting along on being relatively powerful, young and cute. His father's associates treated him like a favored nephew. Pepper treated him like he was her own child.

He had to change. He had to grow up. If someone had been in the rooms above the gym, his power would probably have killed them. He needed control. Harry looked at the silver sheaths on his forearms. His father had designed them to damp his access to the chaos. Mistress Harkness told him that as he matured he would gain the capability to control the chaos within him. She suggested that it would be his 20th year at the soonest. Until that time, he was a threat to those around him.

No more goofing around. No more running around the mansion hiding from Hank and Simon. He needed to study, to practice, to learn. Harry couldn't afford to be a child any longer. It was time to focus. It was time to grow up.

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Character profiles:

Chapter 7.

In order of appearance

Tony Stark - Billionaire industrialist, Genius level IQ, if it can be made, he's got 2. If it can't be made, he's only got the prototype. Secretly (at the time of the story) Ironman. The Ironman Armor is form fitting Mech, with flight capabilities (ground to orbit with auxiliary boosters) near infinite defensive capabilities, many many offensive capabilities.

Jennifer Walters – Also known as the She-Hulk. First Cousin to Bruce Banner The Incredible Hulk, Jennifer received her powers due to an emergency blood transfusion from her cousin, picking up some of his more… demonstrative traits. Like Banner, Jennifer possesses great strength, durability, endurance and a healing factor. Unlike her cousin, she almost always retains her full intelligence and personality as She-Hulk. At the time of this story, Jennifer is locked in her She-Hulk form.

Wanda – Wanda Maximoff, also known as the Scarlet Witch. A mutant with the ability to affect
probabilities. By the time of this story she had mastered Chaos magic.

**Mistress Harkness** – Agatha Harkness, survivor of the Salem Witch trials, and for the purposes of this story, alum of Hogwarts. Hufflepuff 1680. The single most powerful Witch in the world.

**Hank** – Hank McCoy PhD. Biochemistry. PhD Genetics. PhD Physics. M. D. Large man, covered with Blue fur, his feet are as dexterous as his hands, very strong, very agile, and very fast. Most commonly associated with the X-men using his imaginative codename "Beast" He spent several years with the Avengers

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**A/N: A few thoughts.**

I said it before, but you all continue to amaze me with the interest you have in this silly little story. Thank you for all your kind words.

Since last update I've finally seen the Ironman movie, as evidenced in my scene in the lab. Overall, I loved the flick, some things annoyed me, Jarvis being an AI, but over all a great popcorn flick.

In answer to a few questions, I have no intention of having Bruce Banner nor his alter ego making an appearance in this story. He tends to cause messes that would make even Tom Riddle sit back and say "Damn!" That level of destruction isn't really in my plans.

There have also been questions as to what happened to change Harry from the goofy giggling nine year old running around Stark Manor with Beast and Wonderman to the Type A personality with failure issues that is attending class at Hogwarts… In this chapter I attempted to show just what happened.

Just remember, when you come to the boring parts, imagine a montage with inspirational music…
July 27, 1990:

New York City

Stark Estate:

The party was in full swing. The Jack and Julie Powers were fighting about something. Powers were beginning to be manifest, as they usually did when Jack was upset. Franklin Richards took a quick look around for adults… None were in the general vicinity; Secret IDs were safe… for now.

Seeing the Powers fight made Franklin notice that Harry had seemingly disappeared from the party. Normally Harry would be right in the middle of any Jack/Julie fight trying to keep it from escalating. Seeing Harry's crush on Julie cracked Franklin up, both because Harry wouldn't admit to liking Julie and because of Julie's being utterly unaware of the crush. To twelve year old Julie, 10 year old Harry was a team mate on the rare occasions that Harry and Franklin managed to join the Power Pack on an adventure, and nothing more.

Franklin set out to find Harry, both to get him to cool Jack down (Harry seemed to be the only one Jack would listen to) and to tease his best friend once again about crushing on Julie… It would serve him right, besides Franklin planned to be getting his revenge for Harry hanging the Code Name 'Tattletale' on him the first time they had gone out with the Pack.

Something had happened to Harry back in May, something bad. It had put him in the hospital for a couple of days, and since then Harry was… subdued. Not the goofy kid that marveled at Uncle Ben's rocky epidermis any more, rather a thoughtful young man who was maturing rapidly. That made Franklin a bit sad. He missed the goofy aspect of his best friend.

Some how he knew just were to look. The Tree Fort. The old Walnut's leaves completely hid their tree fort from view from the ground. No one noticed when Franklin scampered up the hidden ladder.

There he was, looking out over the Stark Estate.

"Hey Har."

"Hey Frank."
Only one person could call him Frank and live. "What's up? It's not like you to stay away from the party. Julie's here and she's so bored she's letting Jack get to her." No reaction to the Julie dig. That wasn't good. "What's wrong Harry?"

"I screwed up Frank. I tapped into some weird magic that I couldn't control. It almost killed me, and it was only dumb luck that I didn't hurt anyone else."

Ah, that's what's wrong. "So you screwed up. Welcome to the club."

"What?"

"Hey, Omega class Mutant with severe control issues here remember? Omega as 'End of the World' you know?" Franklin lifted his shirt to show the mesh underneath. "This is the latest of Dad's designs to keep me powered down."

A smile crept across Harry's lips. He pulled the sleeves of his shirt back to display the silver limiters on his forearms. "Cool, I've got depowering tech too..."

"It's like Uncle Ben says. 'Life is hard, and then you die.' Everyone like us has their problems Har. Think about Uncle Ben. He used to be a great looking guy that all the ladies liked; now he's a big orange rock guy. He tries to hide it by being a goof and making jokes, but it eats him up inside when ever someone is frightened of him. Uncle Johnny's terrified that he'll lose control of his flame and end up hurting people, he practices all the time. Mom is afraid that someday she'll go invisible and never be able to come back, and Dad, he's afraid that someday he'll lose the ability to control his body, and just become apuddle of skin."

"I know that. It's just that I never really thought about how dangerous I could be." The grin had vanished as quickly as it came. "What if I actually hurt someone?"

"And what if I destroy the world? I probably can you know. I saw the look on Professor Xavier's face when he came out and tested me last April just before my birthday. He and Dad are talking about me going to his school in Westchester County to see if he can help me control my powers before they exceed the capabilities of Dad's tech."

"You wouldn't destroy the world."

"And you wouldn't kill someone. Not if you could help it." Franklin saw Harry's eyes gain a bit of hope. "Every one who wears a goofy outfit is afraid of something, Harry. Heck, I bet normal people are afraid too, I'd have to take their word for it though because nobody I know is normal in any way. Now, come on Birthday Boy, today, I'm mostly afraid that the cake and ice cream will be gone and I won't get any because I was up here holding your hand while you cried like a girl."

Harry slugged him in the shoulder. "I'm not crying."

"You hit like a girl too. Maybe we should put a bow in your hair and call you Harriet."

Franklin hit the ground running with a no longer moping, but seriously cheeched off Harry only a few steps behind with murder in his eye.

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Are you looking forward to starting at Hogwarts?

Oh, yes. I'm all packed and just waiting to go. I wonder where I will be sorted.
You should try to be near the Boy-Who-Lived. You would do well in Ravenclaw.

Ravenclaw? Really? I was hoping for Gryffindor with Ron and the twins. Plus Percy is a Prefect, he promised Daddy that he would look out for me.

You would be wasted in Gryffindor. From what you have told me of young Harry, he may well be your soul mate. You need to be near him.

That comment gave the girl pause. I don't know if I believe in soul mates Tom. As many people as there are in the world, wouldn't it be likely that one's soul mate could be born on the other side of the world and never be met? Surely one could love many different people couldn't one?

You over analyze everything. Sometimes you just have to believe.

Perhaps you're right. I'll have to think about that.

Have you got everything? Once you leave, you can't come back you know.

I know what you're hinting at Tom, I won't forget you. You're riding in my pocket, that way we can talk if we need to, and I can keep you updated on my adventures.

It had taken a month, but finally the idiot girl had filled in the blanks of the legend of this Boy-Who-Lived, this Harry Potter that had somehow defeated his older self. The idea that his 55 year old self could be defeated by a mere toddler made absolutely no sense. The girl transcribed the passages from three different histories into his diary. Having examined the official accounts in minute detail, Riddle had determined that either the account of that Halloween night was fabricated from whole cloth, or the boy's survival was due to some aspect of magic that Riddle did not fully understand.

Still, certain parts of the story had impressed Riddle beyond any of his expectations. He had actually succeeded in his quest. He was so powerful that the people of this era were frightened to even speak his Nom de Guerre, a decade after his passing. Deep inside the diary Riddle found himself wondering just how the anagram produced as an exercise in third year Arithmancy had become how he was known to the world at large.

Lord Flight from Death. The irony was delicious. As soon as they arrived at Hogwarts he would start influencing this girl to take the first steps toward unleashing Salazar's pet into the school. First, any cockerels in the school's coops must be dealt with… He wondered if the Chamber of Secrets still held the shadowy reputation it had in his day… Since the roosters had to die, using their blood for a quick message on the walls would inspire a certain amount of fear, at least among the staff…

As soon as he could establish control… Then the Parseltongue imprinting would begin.

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Harry stepped through the barrier onto platform 9 ¾. He smiled as he spotted a few friends and offered waves of greetings. Of course a quiet return couldn't happen, that would be too easy.

"Oh hell." He heard Jennifer say behind him. Before he could turn around he saw the look on Hermione's face as she looked past him. Surprise and awe. That could only mean one thing. He turned back to the barrier to see the real Jennifer holding her image inducer in her hand frowning. He
knew that frown. It usually preceded major property damage.

"I warned you that might happen." Harry said with a grin as he glanced about. The crowd of students and parents were starting to notice. This might be amusing.

"Tony said this stupid piece of junk was hardened against magic." The tall green woman said.

"It is hardened. That's why you could stroll around Diagon Alley, but you just passed through a major chunk of magic." Harry gestured back at the barrier. "It overloaded the shunts something terrible." Harry reached out and took the device from Jennifer. He manipulated the controls a bit. "Ok, I've selected the secondary array. Don't try to power it up until you're on the other side of the barrier, or you'll have to be big and green all the way to the airport."

"Hermione?" Kristine Granger said with a huge smile. "Close your mouth dear."

"She-Hulk? You're the She-Hulk?" Hermione looked up into the eyes of the suddenly much larger (and much greener) woman as a crowd of Muggle born and other students with enough ties to the Muggle world to recognize Jennifer in her hero personae began to gather around.

Harry noticed that the majority of the pure bloods on the platform were moving away with fear in their eyes. He could understand their fear. Being as disassociated with the Mundane world as they were, the Pure Bloods probably thought Jennifer was a troll or something. At seven and a half feet tall the Green woman with hair that made Hermione's seem staid and utterly controlled was a sight to behold. Clad in a white and purple body stocking, white boots and black fingerless gloves she exuded power and intelligence.

Jennifer was kneeling amongst her attentive audience, laughing, telling jokes, telling short stories of her adventures and even signing a few autographs, causing renewed laughter at her attempts to use a quill.

"She certainly didn't let the loss of her illusion of normalcy bother her." Kristine Granger said quietly to Harry.

"I've long thought that Jennifer prefers being in her She-Hulk form." Harry said quietly. "The only reason she was using the image inducer was to allow us to not attract attention."

"She's an amazing woman," Kristine said smiling down at her daughter's friend. "She thinks the world of you."

"I sometimes think that I've become a sort of surrogate child for many of the women associated with the Avengers… with a few notable exceptions." Harry smiled thinking of Moondragon and Janet VanDyne and their absolute refusal to do any of the 'motherly' things the other women seemed to enjoy. "Hermione's going to be furious with me."

Kristine nodded. "I had wondered if you knew that. As much of a Hero fan as she is, to have had the She-Hulk under the same roof for four days… You're doomed…" Kristine smiled at the expression on the boy's face. "Unless, of course you've got her a present." Carefully watching the boy's face she continued. "Jennifer already told me what you got her to do. That will probably shield you from the worst of it."

Harry nodded. It was then he noticed the Head Boy and Head Girl hesitantly coming forward to usher everyone onto the train. The crowd around Jennifer dispersed slowly; Kristine gathered Hermione into a good bye hug as Jennifer swept Harry up off the ground into a hug of her own.

"Don't get caught."
"Get caught doing what?" He asked, puzzled.

"Don't get caught doing whatever you do Harry. I know I'm supposed to tell you to stay out of trouble, but I know you too well. If you can't manage to stay out of trouble, at least don't get caught." She lowered Harry to the ground, and ruffled his hair. "See you at Christmas Shorts Stuff."

Harry received another hug from Hermione's mother as Hermione climbed onboard the train. Shaking his head at the generalized insanity of adults, Harry waved as he climbed aboard himself.

"Hermione is angry isn't she?" The large green woman said, stating the obvious.

"At Harry, yes. Deliriously happy to have met you. You can probably count on letters asking every question in the she manages to think of. You're one of her favorites you know." Kristine said.

"Harry did mention one of my posters in her room. Poor Harry."

"Don't worry too much. Your present will make it mostly better, and he's too damned smooth for her to stay mad at for long. Stuart said that if Harry doesn't change much, he'll be buying a shotgun by their 4th year."

"Well, Harry did learn from the best." Jennifer laughed. "I know you've met Tony, have you ever seen him in action?"

"No, and I didn't need to. The first time we met it was a private dinner with the Patils. He completely charmed Dhanyata and me without even being aware he was doing it. Harry has the same kind of presence…" Kristine paused for a moment and continued with a grin. "We can only hope he uses his powers for good…"

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July 28, 1991:

New York City

Stark Estate:

"Well, I guess we've pretty got our work cut out for us to make sure you work off all that cake you ate yesterday Trooper."

From his seat at the kitchen table Harry grinned up at the Captain. The party Jarvis had thrown for his eleventh birthday had the potential to become a legend among the pre-teen set. A magician that had cracked Harry up was still trying to figure out how the 'birthday boy' had managed to duplicate almost every one of his illusions.

The highlight of the party from Harry's point of view had been a much unexpected, very light, very chaste kiss from thirteen year old Julie Power as she and her siblings were leaving. The pretty young girl exited the manor house leaving behind a very shocked and very happy young man.

The burst of accidental magic that resulted from his sudden jubilation as the kiss had sunk in had changed the color of everything in the manor's entry hall to a crazy mishmash of day-glow colors, that had resisted every effort to put to rights, until Agatha Harkness had spent twenty minutes putting everything back to it's original appearance muttering about children lacking the control and morals of her day.

The kiss itself had presented Harry with an odd biological reaction that confused him intensely until
it dawned on him what it was.

"Well." Steve Rogers said in his best Drill Instructor voice, doing his level best not to laugh. "I think it's pretty obvious you're going to be useless for the rest of the day. Go take a cold shower Trooper, and be ready to actually work tomorrow."

Rogers was very proud of himself. He managed to get completely out of the house before he started laughing.

Harry remained sitting at the kitchen table being fussed over by a greatly amused Jarvis when an owl flew into the window screen. The bird hit the screen at almost full bore, and fell to the ground outside the kitchen window with a loud squawk. Harry and Jarvis exchanged looks of confusion. Harry rose from his chair to check on the bird when there was a tapping at the door.

Jarvis checked the intruder sensor suite by the door and saw that the scan was clear. He then opened the door. The owl was standing in the doorway looking somewhat disgruntled. It snapped its beak at Jarvis, then flew to the table where Harry was standing and extended its leg.

Tied to the Owl's leg was an envelope. It seemed that the owl wanted Harry to remove the letter.

"Be careful Harry." Jarvis said. "One should always be wary of animals acting oddly, that that is the oddest behavior I've ever seen in a bird."

"There's an envelope tied to its leg." Harry said. "Have you ever heard of any one using owls like carrier pigeons?"

Harry delicately plucked at the knot holding the envelope to the owl's leg, keeping an eye on the owl. When the envelope was free he picked it up and stared at it. Who would use an owl to send a letter? Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter

The Kitchen

5847 Stark Lane,

Stark Township, the state of New York,

United States.

Potter? He hadn't been 'Potter' for years. The envelope was thick and heavy, made of heavy yellowish paper, and the address was hand written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.

For a moment the lack of the stamp really confused him. Then he remembered how the letter had been delivered and felt stupid. Turning the envelope over, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.

Breaking the seal he removed several sheets of heavy paper similar to that of the envelope.
Unfolding the papers he found himself reading the cover letter.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy HeadMistress

Harry dimly recalled Mistress Harkness speaking of a 'Hogwarts' (a particularly silly name, which was the reason it stuck in his mind) saying that she had attended in her youth.

Why would a school of Witchcraft and Wizardry (Witchcraft AND Wizardry? Was there a difference?) be attempting to recruit him? How did one go about being accepted to a school without applying?

Very odd.

"What is it Harry?" Jarvis asked.

"A letter of acceptance to a magical school in..." Harry looked over the paperwork "in Scotland. Did Dad send in an application to a school of magic under my birth name and not tell me?"

"That seems unlikely." Jarvis said shaking his head. "I do know that Mistress Harkness has suggested that she would be happy to continue as your tutor in magical theory and application."

"Weird." Harry looked at the owl, who seemed somewhat exhausted... How did he know that? He pushed his plate toward the bird, which immediately helped itself to some left over bacon. Jarvis came forward with a small bowl of water, which also seemed to please the owl. "Are you waiting for a reply fella?" Harry asked feeling stupid talking to a bird, and was thankful to get no response.

Harry pulled a pen and note pad from the drawer built into the table.
Deputy Headmistress McGonagall:

Thank you for your letter, though I am confused how I could have been accepted to a school I have not applied to attend.

Be that as it may, I have not had a chance to discuss this opportunity with my father, who is away on business and will not return until after the deadline listed in your cover letter has past. Rather than hold your Owl here (and that is a rather unique and unexpected method of mail delivery I must say) I thought that I would send you a return note immediately.

In as much as I have been receiving tuition in the various magical specialties from a tutor for some time now, and my father and I are happy with the results. Truly I see no reason to change now.

Should my needs change in the future, then surely one of the schools on the North American continent would be a more convenient choice would you not agree?

At any rate, since your deadline is approaching, I must respectfully decline the offer. I will of course discuss your offer with my father upon his return, and he may wish to discuss the options you offer at that time.

Respectfully:

Harry Stark

P.S. Please note that while my birth name was 'Harry Potter', since my adoption in May of 1986 my legal name has been Harry James Stark. You may wish to update your records accordingly.

Harry dug about in the drawer the pen and paper had come from until he found an envelope. He placed his note inside and sealed the envelope, when tied it to the leg of the Owl in the manner that the original letter had been fastened. The bird seemed to examine the envelope, then dipped its head to take another drink of water.

Harry opened the door to the yard, and watched as the bird flew off. He stood in the door way watching the bird fly until he could no longer pick it out on the horizon.

"Weird."

—oo000000oo—

His backpack over one shoulder Harry made his way back to the last car on the Express. Hermione must really be mad he thought. She didn't wait. Reaching the last compartment on the last car, Harry opened the door to some odd looks from Susan and Padma. Hermione was sitting staring out the
window with her arms crossed over her chest, and Neville just offered a small smile and a shrug. 

Doomed. Kristine was right it seemed.

"How do you know the She-Hulk Harry?" Hannah asked with wide sparkling eyes.

"She works with the team of Heroes my father finances. After what happened last year he wanted to make sure I made it onto the train. So he asked Jennifer to escort me to the train."

"When were you going to tell me?" Hermione asked in a very cold tone of voice as Hannah was explaining to the purebloods who the She-Hulk was and what she did.

"The original plan was for me to tell you just about now." Harry noted as the train started moving out of the station.

"Why? Why did you feel the need to make fools of me and my parents?"

"Hermione quit it. You parents know who Jennifer is, they noticed the first day. I didn't lie to you about anything, Jennifer IS Jennifer. We told you her real honest to god publicly known name. She demonstrated her strength on that Lockhart tool rather publicly right in front of you. The reason I didn't sit you down and tell you 'Hey Hermione, this is She-Hulk' is that, honestly, I wanted you and Padma to pay attention to me and not go all fan girl over Jennifer. I was selfish in that, but I didn't make a fool of you."

"Fine." The bushy haired girl stood up. "If you'll excuse me." She stomped out of the compartment.

Padma watched the angry girl leave the compartment, and then glanced toward Harry. He seemed to be genuinely surprised. She couldn't stand to see her two best friends fighting. She quietly exited the compartment herself looking to find Hermione and act as a peacemaker.

She found Hermione in the loo. A little magic (it felt good to use it again after not being allowed since June) and the lock popped open. Hermione was standing over the sink crying.

"Just go away."

"Oh, you've got so many friends you can push one away Hermione?"

"Padma…"

"Look, we all worried about Harry since the Headmaster had his Techsuit confiscated back in April. We were both depressed after his hearing at the Wizengamot where it looked like we wouldn't ever see him again. Then we celebrated when we got our friend back. I was with you when we picked him up, and he introduced us both to Jennifer Walters. He didn't lie to us Hermione." Padma reached out and hugged her friend. You got to know Jennifer, the only thing you didn't see until today is that she was green."

"I know all that." Hermione said, still sobbing. "I just thought that he would tell me EVERYTHING."

"He told you more than you realize you pillock He said he wanted us to pay attention to him. Think about that."

Hermione was quiet for a moment. "Ok, I can see that. But I'm still mad at him."

"Oh by all means, be mad, and make him pay so that he never does it again. We've gotten to him
young. As long as we get him properly trained now in a few years when we decide we want a boy
friend, he'll be nicely broken in."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "You haven't giggled once, so I know you aren't really Parvati trying
to pass as Padma again. Where did that 'boyfriend' nonsense come from?"

"Just contingency planning for the future." Padma said with a grin. "He's cute and his father's rich,
what more could you want? Wash your face."

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Neville covertly watched Harry as the other boy sat in the compartment attempting to figure out
exactly what it was he had done wrong. Hannah and Sue were ignoring Harry, showing a sisterly
solidarity with Hermione for whatever crime she imagined the Ravenclaw had committed.

Neville was studiously pretending to be reading a professional Herbologist's periodical, making
every effort to remain the hell out of whatever trouble Harry had managed to land himself in. In
truth, Neville wasn't all that sure what exactly it was that Harry was supposed to have done, but
asking the girls what it was that Harry had done would have one of two equally unfortunate results
1) cause the women to accuse him of having taken Harry's side, or 2) force the girls to acknowledge
that Harry hadn't actually done anything wrong and that they were wrong in treating him badly.
Either of those alternatives would have him joining Harry in the dog house, so sadly his friend was
on his own.

Hermione and Padma returned to the compartment. Hermione sat across from Harry while Padma
took her place between Harry and Neville.

"I've decided to be angry with you for a while, but not hate you for it."

"That's great. Your mom said I was 'doomed'. I guess since you're just angry, then I don't need to
give you the present."

Hermione and the other girls perked up. "Present?" The Bushy haired Ravenclaw asked. "You got
me a present?"

"That was for if I was doom.' Harry said with a small grin. "Since you're just angry, I'll save it for
if I ever get you that mad."

Hermione's left eyebrow raised slightly, and Padma smacked Harry on the head.

"My present. Now Potter."

"Ok, ok, pushy witch." From his shirt pocket Harry withdrew a metallic square that looked for all the
world like a silver saltine.

The compartment was silent except for the ambient sounds of the train. "That's my present? A silver
square?"

"Hold your horses. Give a guy a chance." Harry lay the square on the palm of his left and covered it
with his right hand. He then closed his eyes and appeared to be concentrating.

After thirty seconds, Hermione couldn't stand it anymore. She had forgotten that she was angry with
Harry and just wanted to know what he was up to. "Well?"

"Aluminum is hard. The magic just keeps sliding off of it." Harry complained.
"What? I'd never heard that." Padma said

"Not really surprising that you haven't. It's only been the last hundred years or so there was a lot of aluminum around as a pure metal. I've not seen any in the magical world yet. I would guess that not a lot of wizards have tried to use it." Harry concentrated some more, this time closing his eyes. "Oh, hell with it." He pulled out his wand and cast the expanding charm on the square. It expanded from the size of a cracker to eighteen inches square and a quarter inch thick. "It shrunk ok wandlessly." He complained.

"What is it?" Hermione asked.

Harry handed the sheet of aluminum to her. "Be careful, it's heavy. It's an autograph."

Hermione took the hunk of metal as the other girls crowded around. In the center of the sheet of metal was the impression of a huge hand print, with the fingers spread wide. The print was detailed enough to see the lines on the palm, and even some of the fingerprints. Hermione looked over to Harry in confusion.

"Jennifer made it this morning."

"You asked her to do this for me?"

Harry shrugged. "I thought it would go with your poster of her."

"She just pressed her hand into the metal?" Hannah asked incredulously.

"Yep."

Padma looked up from the sheet in amazement. "What did she use to write the message?"

"Her right index finger."

Hermione looked down to reread the inscription again.

To Hermione:

By now you know who the mousey brunette who's been following Harry around is:

Cut Harry a break, he didn't want to share his friends with me, and considering how much fun you all had, I don't blame him.

Just remember, I made scared them with my mind before I scared them with my muscles… and girls with our kind of hair need to stick together

Jennifer (She-Hulk) Walters

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Character profiles:

Chapter 10

In order of appearance

Jennifer Walters – Also known as the She-Hulk. First Cousin to Bruce Banner The Incredible
Hulk, Jennifer received her powers due to an emergency blood transfusion from her cousin, picking up some of his more... demonstrative traits. Like Banner, Jennifer possesses great strength, durability, endurance and a healing factor. Unlike her cousin, she almost always retains her full intelligence and personality as She-Hulk. At the time of this story, Jennifer is locked in her She-Hulk form.

**Steve** – Steve Rogers also know as Captain America. Most specifically someone you do NOT want to get in a fight with. Powers: None. He is the ultimate Soldier, created in the Early Years of WWII by exposure to the Super Soldier Formula and exposure to an unspecified radiation.

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**A/N: A few thoughts.**

The continued popularity of this story continues to amaze me. Thanks for the reviews, both the picks and the pans.

As most people have noticed, I've mangled canon pretty well. As I see it changing the story lines beyond Harry's interactions is fraught with problems. First year Quirrelmort had to be the baddie, but I saw no need for Harry to be the one to take him out. Second year has the Diary and the Basilisk, and the Diary has already made its appearance.

I've boogered up the canon third year plot with Sirius already being sprung and legally free, so third year will be canon free. Fourth year has the Quidditch World Cup and the Triwizard Tournament that can't really be changed. However Harry and the 'last compartment of the last car' crew won't be at the World Cup, and I see no reason to emulate the canon Triwizard point for point, as it has been pointed out by far better writers than I, the second and third tasks were pretty stupid and had zero spectators appeal, so I am working on coming up with 'better' events.

What I'm basically saying is that this year (2nd) will be the last with even a nodding recognition of canon. I hope that doesn't bother too many people.

I've played with a little scene in my head that has 17 year old Harry, fully kitted out in a Blue and Silver magically powered version of the Warmachine Armor standing beside 17 year old Franklin Richards in full control of his Omega class Psi powers explaining to Tom Riddle just where he went wrong and why he shouldn't repeat that mistake in any future lives he manages to have… But that would be wrong for a Harry Potter fic (though I may Omake it…) Enough of my rambles. Again thanks for reading and all the reviews.
Harry Potter and the Invincible TechnoMage Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

A/N: I do not own Harry Potter. Nor any of the Marvel Comics Characters mentioned herein. But you knew that.

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Harry Potter and The Invincible TechnoMage

Chapter Eleven - Year Two Projects

July 30, 1991:
Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry
Professor McGonagall's Office:

Minerva was finishing up her supply requisitions for the new school year when one of the Hogwarts Owls entered her office via one of the open windows. She recognized this particular bird as being the one she had sent with Harry Potter's acceptance letter. How very odd. Why might it have taken a full week for Harry's response to arrive? Conjuring a bowl of water for the owl, she untied the letter from the bird's leg. Paper? Why would anyone make an envelope out of paper? Opening the envelope with a flick of her wand, she removed the letter contained within. Paper again. Why would anyone use paper for official correspondence? She would have to speak with young Mr. Potter and explain the realities of tradition to him. She opened the letter and began to read.

Her jaw dropped as soon as she reached the part that read `I am confused how I could have been accepted to a school I have not applied to attend.' How could he not know of Hogwarts? She continued to read...

His father? Had that horrible Muggle actually cared enough for Harry to have actually adopted him?

Harry Potter declined his place at Hogwarts? How could that be? What was this about having a magical tutor? North America? What was the boy doing in North America? Stark? The boy's guardian's name was Dursley.

Who was Stark?

Minerva opened a drawer in her desk and withdrew a tall bottle of an amber elixir and a glass. Pouring herself three fingers of the 80 year old single malt, she tipped it back, and then returned the bottle to its place of storage. What had happened? How had she failed Lily and James so thoroughly? How could the little boy she had bounced on her knee no longer even acknowledge his
own name?

The rules were clear. She had received a response from the prospective student, and that student had declined the offer. That was the end of it.

But how could it be? This was Harry Potter, Son of James Potter and Lily Evans. He was the Boy-Who-Lived, the defeater of You-Know-Who. This wasn't just any student, this was… Harry Potter. A sickening thought came to her. Enrollment might actually drop if word got out that Harry Potter would not be attending Hogwarts.

Minerva steeled her resolve. Albus had to be informed.

The journey to the Headmaster's office was something of a blur as her mind dealt with the Harry Potter's rejection of Hogwarts as well as the three fingers of single malt on an empty stomach. The gargoyle took one look at her expression and shuffled out of her way. It had horrifying memories of spending a week as a small rubber duck the last time she had looked like that and hadn't been allowed instant access to the Headmaster's office.

"Minerva?" The ancient wizard looked up from the paper work on his desk. He was unused to being surprised in his office. "Is there a problem?"

"You might say that Albus." The Transfiguration Mistress handed him the letter from Harry Potter. "This is the response to Harry Potter's Hogwarts Letter. He declined Albus. Harry Potter declined coming to Hogwarts."

Dumbledore paled. "No. He can't decline. He just can't."

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The girl sat with her legs crossed on her bed with the drapes pulled shut. After so many years of anticipation, she could hardly believe that she was actually, finally here. The trip to London had been so exciting, as had the train ride. Upon arriving at Hogsmeade station, she had been a little apprehensive, until she heard the man's voice.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!"

The man calling was huge, easily the largest person she had ever seen.

"C'mon, follow me — any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

Along with the other firsties she had followed in the man's wake like ducklings behind their mother. He led them to a flotilla of tiny boats and bade them to climb on board "No more than four to a boat."

With all the others she gasped when the castle first came into view, it was so… pretty. That was when Colin, her boat mate, one of a pair of boys she knew to be Muggle born having met them and shared a compartment on the train, muttered "It's only a model" which caused the other boy to start laughing. She refrained from asking what was so funny and what a model might be. So very soon the boats arrived at a small dock and the huge man led them to a door way in the outer wall of the castle, where he knocked.

The door opened to reveal a witch. "The firs' years, Professor McGonagall," he said.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."
The woman pulled the door wide. The entrance hall was larger than anything she had ever imagined. The first years all followed Professor McGonagall through the castle, until they reached a doorway, where the professor told them to wait.

The girl only had time to grasp the diary inside her robes and wish she had the time and privacy to speak with Tom before Professor McGonagall had returned and was leading the assembled first years through into the Great Hall of Hogwarts, where the Sorting Hat was explained. She waited her turn as Professor McGonagall worked her way through the alphabet. Her eyes searched the sea of pointed hats looking for familiar faces, spotting Percy's smile and nod, as well as the cheerful smiles from the twins. Ron was pointedly ignoring her, seemingly embarrassed by her presence.

Suddenly Professor McGonagall was calling her name, and she approached the stool with more than a little trepidation. After all this could predict the path her life would take. Sitting, she waited for the Professor to lower the hat upon her head.

All in all the experience was surprisingly straightforward. The Hat looked into her mind and asked her a few questions, and then the ancient Hat proclaimed its decision to the assembled school. She stood and removed the hat, remembering to thank the magical construct for its time and effort, and then she quietly walked to her new home and housemates to the applause of the school.

The meal was superb, and the words of the Headmaster were confusing and odd, though in an exciting way. Before long the students were dismissed to their dormitories, so she followed the Prefect to the dorms along with all the other first years. What followed as a short tour of the dorm, common room, and a short interview in the Head of House's office. She then found herself in her own newly assigned dorm room with three roommates. After a brief period of introductions each of the four exhausted girls crawled onto their four-poster bed, closed the drapes and tried to get some sleep in preparation for the next day.

But sleep wouldn't come for her. With a sigh, she pulled the diary from where she had hidden it, under her pillow, found a quill and bottle of ink in her book bag, and scratched out her thoughts.

*Hello Tom.*

*Hello. I trust you've had an exhilarating day? How was the train ride?*

*So very exciting. You were right about everything. I had so much fun, and I made several friends.*

*Did you? Tell me about them.*

*Oh, yes. There was a pair of Muggle born boys and three girls from magical families who shared my compartment. We had fun just talking and even singing Muggle songs that the boys taught us. One of them likes to take photos and he was flashing his camera at us the whole trip. He wants to meet Harry Potter too, he was really surprised when I told him that Harry's name was 'Stark' now.*

*You should be careful associating with the Muggle born. They are a constant danger to the Magical World.*

*Really? That thought gave her pause. Daddy always says that they are nice people with the most interesting things. He is constantly talking about the amazing things they do to make up for not having magic.*

*They've fooled so many people.* From deep inside the diary Riddle was wondering if he should back
off this topic. Someday everyone will see them for that they are.

I thought you would want to know Tom, I've seen Harry Stark. She wrote trying to change the subject.

Have you? What is he like?

I don't really know. I saw him before I boarded the Express. He was with a huge green woman.

A green woman?

Yes. I'm told that she is some sort of Muggle Hero. You know, a crime fighter?

Tom Riddle considered what he had learned. From his summers in Muggle London he remembered stories of lunatics who dressed in colorful outfits to fight crime. Some of them transitioned to war, fighting against Grindelwald's Muggle forces in Europe. He dimly recalled having actually seen one in action in the spring of 1943. A man in black leather with a stylized version of the Union Flag on his chest who went by the name `Union Jack'.

They allow Muggles on Platform 9 ¾ now?

Oh, yes. I saw many people that could only be the families of Muggle born. It was really exciting seeing the green woman. I've never seen anyone that was green or that large before, but then I met Hagrid. He is much bigger, but nowhere near as green.

So what is Harry Stark like?

Keep the foolish girl focused on getting close to the Potter boy, the soul fragment thought.

I didn't actually talk to him Tom. He was with his friends on the train. Intruding on their reunion would have been rude.

You need to speak to him. He is your soul mate, I'm sure of it.

Well... Dinner was nice. There was so much food and all of it very good...

The girl headed off on one of her tangents. The sooner Riddle could take control, the better.

The first day of classes was over. So far, so good as far as Harry could see. Other than a few snarky comments from Professor Snape no one had said anything about his abrupt leaving the year before and even Snape seemed to be operating more from inertia than any real spite. Since their disagreement at the beginning of the previous year he and Snape had come to something of a detente. They both behaved properly toward one another. Oh, Snape was still an asshole, but he didn't target Harry or his friends for special attention. Harry could live with that.

At the evening meal Professor Flitwick had come to the table and announce a meeting for all the second year students at 8 pm, an announcement that had inspired a great deal of levity from the upper years, though no one would explain why. Padma, Hermione and Harry were working on their homework assignments to pass the time until the meeting.
Harry was seated at his study carrel having been working on the essay that Professor McGonagall had assigned for Transfiguration, (2 feet on Animate to Inanimate Transfigurations, the Rules and Requirements for Success) for more than an hour when he sat back in his chair.

"ARRGH! I hate these freaking books!"

"Harry…” Hermione started.

"Is a damned index too much to ask for? Is expecting the text to be laid out in a logical understandable manner a sin? Why don't they have a Table of Contents at very least?"

"Language Harry." Hermione admonished.

"What's an index?" Padma asked.

"An index is a cross reference of a books text." Hermione explained while Harry fumed. Seeing that Padma didn't understand she continued. "For example if you were looking for 'Albus Dumbledore' in a Muggle text, you could go to the index, look him up, and it would list all the page numbers where he is referenced."

"Oh." Understanding shown in Padma's eyes. "I can see how that would useful."

"Mean while I've been trying to find all seventeen rules for Animate to Inanimate Transfiguration. I find three rules in chapter five, one in chapter seven, nine in chapter thirteen, and I haven't found a single mention of rules three, four, fifteen or seventeen anywhere in this damned text. Would it have killed the author or publisher to have had all the rules in a single table?"

"Probably." Padma dimpled. "Seriously though, like I said, I could see how a shortcut like that would be useful, but isn't this way a better way to learn?"

"Not really." Harry was having trouble maintaining his mad with two girls smiling at him. "Having to search for every bit of information teaches you the book, not the topic. Having an index would remove the need to search through every page of the book and you could concentrate on Transfiguration."

Professor Flitwick entered the common room and all conversation stopped. The Prefects herded the first years from the room and the upper classes left as well. The diminutive Charms Master made his way to his podium, which was permanently mounted at one end of the common area for meeting such as this one.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts everyone." He said looking out at his twelve assembled second years. "The purpose of this meeting is twofold. The first is to introduce you to the Ravenclaw Library." The Sixth year Prefects entered the common room each carrying an ornate wooden box. The male Prefect (a boy whose name Harry could never remember, he was something of a non-entity) opened his box and handed an odd rune covered device to their Head of House.

"This is a reader for the Ravenclaw Library; there will be one available for each of you, as you need it. This is one of the advantages of being in Ravenclaw. This device was invented by a class mate of mine, Rupert Mason, Ravenclaw, class of 1903. The Reader displays the text of the books recorded in these crystals." He accepted a six inch sliver of crystal, perhaps six inches long from Penny Clearwater, who then passed out additional crystals from her box to the Second years to examine. "Over the last 89 years, we have managed to record the images of every book in the Hogwarts Library, including the Restricted Section onto similar crystals. As new texts are added to the Library stacks, they are added to our private library." The small man's face took on a serious expression.
"Access to the Ravenclaw Library is a privilege. Don't squander it. It is unlikely that you would need access to the Restricted Section as Second years, but if you should, all access to the Restricted Section is authorized by me, so be prepared to make your case."

Anthony Goldstein raised his hand. "Professor? Is it possible to submit personal books to the library for archival purposes if nothing else? I know I have several personal volumes that might be useful additions to the House Library."

"Most generous of you Mr. Goldstein, and yes, if any of you have books that might be useful to the house at large; they can easily be added to the Library. Yes Miss McDougal?"

"Yes Professor, do other houses have similar Libraries?"

"I don't believe that they do. If my belief is correct then this is purely their by own choice. The original invention of the Reader was publicly made, if none of the other houses chose to make use of it, well that is their choice. Any other questions?"

Seeing that they were none, Flitwick continued.

"The second part of the meeting is to discuss your OWL projects. As some of you may already know part of your OWL grade is a project using at least three of the disciplines you are studying here at Hogwarts. The object of the project is for you individually or in teams to produce an original work by the end of your fifth year. Using my friend Rupert as an example for his OWL project he produced a working prototype of his reader, using runes, arithmancy, transfiguration and more than a few charms. His prototype was the size of a sofa, but it worked. He continued with the project for his NEWT Project and the result is the device you now see."

Su Li raised her hand. "Professor, you mentioned teams?"

"Yes." Flitwick nodded. "You may work on your project alone or in teams of any number; teams in the past have even crossed house lines, though I don't believe any currently underway do. If you do work in teams, the project logs must reflect each members efforts and each member must be able to explain every step of every process in use."

Hermione's competitive side was getting away from her. "Professor, how is the project scored?"

"The exact scoring criteria is outlined in the handout Miss Clearwater is passing out now, but among the scoring elements are individual knowledge of the processes of the project, melding at least three different disciplines into the project, and the general usefulness of the end product. The high score from last year's OWL projects was a self reading tea cup. I'm not the biggest fan of Divination, but I was quite impressed with that project, the young Witch involved was rather ingenious in her approach. As with anything of this type scoring can be somewhat subjective. In the four hundred or so years that the Project has existed, there has been a single perfect score, that being the team of Severus Snape your Potions Master, Remus Lupin the current Defense Against the Dark Arts Instructor, and Mr. Stark's birth mother, Lily Evans, in 1976. Their project was a work of theory as to the workings of mind magics and artificial means of guarding one's mind. That was truly a brilliant piece of work. It's a pity the team fell apart and they were not capable of working to bring their project to a practical completion as part of their NEWT project."

The small man looked at the faces of his students. "Bear in mind that the object of the project is to have you integrate your class work into practical experience. It is possible to achieve an O on a project that fails utterly as long as your methodology is sound and your documentation reflects what went wrong. It is also possible for your project to work exactly right and for you to receive a lower grade if for example you took short cuts in getting to where you are going or if a single person of a
team does the majority of the work. You should also bear in mind that working in a team has its advantages and disadvantages and plan accordingly."

"I will be expecting your preliminary outlines of your proposed projects to be submitted to me by the first of November for approval with the final outline submitted upon the return from the Christmas hols. Your outlines can be changed over the next two years to refine your project objectives, but the final outline will be set for grading purposes as of November first of your fourth year. Any more questions for me?"

The meeting carried on for another twenty minutes as the assembled second years peppered they Head of House with questions. It was only after Flitwick had left and Hermione was happily chattering away with her plans for her project that Padma realized that Harry had been sitting quietly through Flitwick's entire presentation, and was even now sitting turning one of the library crystals over and over in his hands, while staring deeply into its facets.

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August 12, 1991:

New York City

Stark International Corporate Headquarters:

"Tony?"

Tony Stark looked up from his workstation. For Pepper to just walk into his office without calling first on the intercom meant one of two things, either he had done something stupid and she was going to chastise him for it, or there was someone in the outer office that she needed to tell him about, but didn't want to be over heard.

Tony rapidly ran through the list of stupid things he had done lately that would anger Pepper, and couldn't think of any she could possibly know about. That meant a visitor.

"What's up Pep?"

"There's a man here wanting to speak to you about Harry."

"Oh?"

"He says his name is Albus Dumbledore and he is the Headmaster of a British School called Hogwarts." She looked torn for a moment. "Tony, he's... odd. He looks like an anorexic Santa Claus who dresses like a color blind Victorian dandy."

Stark raised an eyebrow at that. Turning to his workstation, he accessed the building security system, putting the security camera for Pepper's office on one of the screens. Sitting in the waiting area was a very old man, with a white beard that fell below his belt line. Pepper's suggestion of a Victorian dandy was very accurate; the man was dressed in a suit that went out of fashion in the 1880s, complete with an old fashioned high domed derby hat. She was right about the man evidently being color blind as well. The suit and hat were an odd electric orange, while the man's shirt collar was a blinding chromium yellow, the ensemble was completed by a day glow green cravat.

"So he wants to speak to me about Harry?"

"Yes." Pepper said. "He doesn't have an appointment, so I offered to fit him in tomorrow." She hesitated. That immediately caught Tony's attention. Pepper never hesitated. "He told me that he
couldn't wait, that his time was limited. Tony, I think he did something to me."

"What do you mean?"

"He looked me in the eye as I was trying to politely tell him to take a hike, and suddenly I needed to let him in."

Stark's mouth set into a thin line.

Mind games. Some old man comes into my office and tries to play mind games with Pepper? That son of a…

On the screen the old man suddenly seemed to notice the camera, which was a neat trick as the camera was build into the overhead lighting fixture. Tony watched as the old man's eyes focused on the camera's lens, then seemed to concentrate, then the display rippled, and the camera failed. Stark's mouth went dry. He recognized that failure. He'd seen it many times from systems monitoring Harry.

Magic.

A few keystrokes brought the magic hardened security systems on line, including the offensive systems.

"Show the gentleman in Pep. Dumbledore was it?"

"Dumbledore." She corrected.

"Dumbledore, right. Show him in." He started the recording system for his office. "And call Jarvis; have him put the estate into lockdown."

Remus Lupin watched as the door closed behind Harry Potter… No, not Potter, Harry Stark. He had asked the boy to remain after class so that he might reintroduce himself to the only child of the Marauders. The boy had listened politely to his stories of James and Lily, but there was something about the look in the boy's eyes that suggested a silent long suffering disconnect. The sort of look a polite child offers to an adult who goes on and on telling stories that the child has no interest in.

Despite Sirius' warnings, Remus had half expected Harry to remember his 'Unca Mooie' and to launch himself into the older man's arms like he had done so long ago. But of course that unrealistic, more than a decade had passed. The boy had no memories of the time before his parents were lost.

Still, Remus mused, he was near Harry. He could see James and Lily in the boy's every move, every expression. It hurt a bit, showing Remus what he had lost, but at the same time, it was a glorious reminder that life goes on.

The Werewolf packed his notes away into his valise and exited his classroom heading for the Professors Quarters. Actually being able to enter this part of the castle still gave him a bit of a tingle. Despite multiple attempts the Marauders had never managed to get into the Professors Quarters. The wards were just too good. Too bad really, they had planned some truly memorable pranks. Of course he was above all that now…

His classes were going well. Harry's class was the last of his series; he had been amazed at how many of his classmates had seemingly been reborn in their children. Neville Longbottom was the
image of Frank, and every time Susan Bones spoke, Remus could hear her father Edgar's voice.

Was it healthy to define so much of himself in relation with the past?

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"Neville, am I a bad person?"

Neville Longbottom watched as Harry tossed a stone into the lake causing it to skip across the surface until it was caught by a tentacle. He and Harry had been playing this game with the Squid for almost fifteen minutes. Several of the upper years had claimed that the Squid was intelligent. Neville was beginning to believe it.

"Probably, most of us are on occasion. What brought this up?"

Harry leaped into the air to snag the stone thrown back to him. "Professor Lupin kept me after DADA to tell me he had been a friend of my birth parents, and told me a few stories about them. Before he let me go he told me that I could come to him anytime to learn more about them."

Neville shrugged. "The Potters were a popular family, your birth Dad and Mum especially. If you want stories about them, my Gran could tell you a few; James and Lily were close with my Mum and Dad and were over at our estate all the time. Hell, Gran tells me you and I played together quite a bit before…"

"Yeah, before. No, what is bothering me is..." Harry hesitated. "I don't really care about James and Lily Potter. I mean I've got no memories of them at all, when people tell me about them, it's like hearing about ancestors instead of parents, you know? I've been shown pictures of them. Lily is pretty, and from what people tell me really smart, and James sort of looks like me, except he wears glasses. I used to, but Dad got my eyes fixed. I just don't feel a.... a connection to them. I mean I've got my Dad, and I've got Pepper, and Happy and Jarvis and Rhodey…"

"I can sort of understand that." Neville said. "I at least know my parents, even if they don't know me. I used to really feel sorry for myself over that, then we met, and it all got put into perspective."

"I'm not complaining Nev, really I'm not. I'm just bothered that I'm not bothered, you know? I think I'm SUPPOSED to care about the Potters, but I don't, not really. I've got a great life that I wouldn't trade for the world, you know?"

"Harry, I think the fact that you feel bad about not feeling bad says it all. You're not a bad person. You're just weird."

"Oh, that makes me feel so much better." Harry jumped to try for the next stone in from the Squid, but it sailed over his outstretched fingers. He turned and ran off to retrieve it.

Neville tossed his stone onto the surface of the lake managing four skips before the giant squid snatched the rock out of the air and threw it back.

"So," Harry said returning from retrieving the Squid's over throw. "Any thoughts on what you're going to do for your OWL project?"

"No, not really." Neville heaved another stone. "Something plant related probably, preferably something as unrelated to potions as possible."

Harry grinned. Neville's potion prowess or lack thereof, was near legendary. "Flitwick said that cross house teams were allowed. Wanna recruit a 'Puff and a Snake and shake things up? I'm pretty sure
either Susan or Hannah would be onboard, and we could try for that Daphne girl you're always staring at."

"Yeah, I'd get a lot done staring at her chest and drooling like an idiot."

Harry grinned wider. Daphne Greengrass was the first of their cohort to 'develop'… Neville hadn't been the only one staring. "There's a project: The Effect of Female Development on Male Salivary Glands and Generalized IQ. We'd fail horribly, but what a way to go."

Neville punched Harry in the shoulder. "Prat." He said, trying not to laugh. Then the blond Gryffindor sobered. "I don't know if I'd be all that comfortable in a team Harry. On my own, I'd only worry about letting me down; I wouldn't want anyone depending on me."

Seeing that Neville was as bored tossing rocks to the Squid as he was, Harry heaved a pair of large Naval Oranges out to the creature. During Hermione's Pirate Adventure Birthday the previous year Harry had discovered the Squid loved oranges. "You always sell yourself short Nev. You're as good as anyone and better than a lot of the people around here." He bumped shoulders with his friend.

"Yeah right. Thanks Harry, but I really think I'll try it on my own."

"Ain't we a pair? Ok. I guess I could go for a cute Gryffie… Padma would be pissed if I went after Parvati, Lavender is getting there… Me and three witches… It don't get any better than that."

"If you team with anyone you're going to team with Padma and Hermione and you know it. They'll keep you in line Mr. Ladies Man."

"Sadly, you're probably right." Harry sighed. "Ah, cruel fate."

Neville bumped him back. "Harry you're pathetic"

"Ah, you've learned my secrets!" Harry grinned. "That reminds me, my Dad said that I could have a friend over next summer, so I was wondering, would you like to come over to visit me for a few weeks this summer? I've got some buddies would want to meet an honest to god English Wizard."

Neville gave Harry an odd look. "You're English, technically. Sort of." He pointed out. "Also a wizard."

"Ah, I don't count. They've seen me. I figured that you'd need some lead time to sell the idea to your grandmother, so I thought I'd ask now."

"I'd love to Harry. I'll ask Gran to start thinking about it. Would you like to spend some time with us at Longbottom Hall?"

"I think I can talk Dad into an even swap… Assuming of course I make it all the way through this school year."

"Yeah, assuming that.

….==ooo00000oo==…. 

A/N: A few thoughts.

Thanks for the reviews, both the picks and the pans.

Believe it or not, many reviewers seem to think that your humble author made a mistake when
Harry didn't seem to know what Dobby was despite having enlisted the help of the Elves of the Hogwarts Kitchens in a prank or three during his period of 'Civil Disobedience'. The explanation for Harry's mistake is really quite logical. Allow me to explain:

[ahem]

You see, the Elves in the Kitchens all wear white smocks and tall poofy Chefs Hats. Dobby on the other hand was just wearing an old nasty crusty Malfoy Pillowcase. You know how you can see someone every day at work in their uniform and not recognize them on the weekend when you see them at the mall in jeans and a tee shirt? Like that. Harry thought Elves wore smocks and Chefs Hats.

See? Perfectly logical.

A few people commented on Hermione's reaction to Harry not telling her who Jennifer was last chapter, feeling that she overreacted.

Of course she did. She's a twelve, almost thirteen year old girl. When my daughter was that age she would go into hysterics if I changed the channel on the TV. Canon Hermione was a pushy little broad, who, after a casual acquaintance called her a 'nightmare' with no friends following the first class of the day spent the entire day in tears. Canon had Charms as the first class of the day, following that class she ran off crying, then canon tells us "Hermione didn't turn up for the next class and wasn't seen all afternoon. On their way down to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast, Harry and Ron overheard Parvati Patil telling her friend Lavender that Hermione was crying in the girls' bathroom and wanted to be left alone."

So the girl spent half the morning and all afternoon until dinner time crying in a lavatory. That my friend, is a spectacular over reaction that I've never seen matched, not by my daughter, and not by any of her friends. As such I don't see the reaction the Hermione of my story to be much of a stretch from canon.

A few people also commented on Padma's plan for training Harry to be a proper boy friend for when either Hermione or she decide they want one. Girls do this. I've heard my daughter and her friends make plots for 'fixing' their male friends for maximum female benefit.

Not that they ever ended up actually dating the boys in question, but that's aside the point.

It's been suggested that the Who's Who go away, so unless I get a massive protest, I'm discontinuing it unless I have a large number of previously unseen characters making an appearance... Like I will the summer before 4th year.
Chapter Notes

A/N: I do not own Harry Potter. Nor any of the Marvel Comics Characters mentioned herein. But you knew that.

Harry Potter and The Invincible TechnoMage

Chapter Twelve - Year Two Research

August 12, 1991:

New York City

Stark International Corporate Headquarters:

"Mr. Stark?" Pepper had returned to the door. "Mr. Albus Dumbledore."

"Thank you Pepper." Tony Stark rose from his chair in full business mode, all smiles and an extended hand, with the old man dutifully shook. "Tony Stark Mr. Dumbledore. I understand you would like to discuss my son Harry. Take a seat please."

The old man sat in the chair Tony had indicated, balancing his bowler hat on his left knee. Tony touched a control on his desktop and several machines extruded from the walls, ceiling and floor all focused on the visitor.

"I wouldn't make any sudden moves if I were you Mr. Dumbledore, especially toward that wand in your inside jacket pocket. My defensive systems would take that as another hostile act on your part."

"What is the meaning of this Stark?"

"Oh, I don't know. You come to my office, you place some sort of magical compulsion on my assistant to get in to see me, and you purposefully destroy one of my security cameras. I really can't imagine why I would suspect you of anything."

The old man colored a bit. "I was a bit overzealous perhaps, I was not sure how much you knew of magic, and there is an international agreement that requires I maintain a certain level of secrecy."

"Ah your 'International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy' an international agreement unique in history as to having no actual nations being a signatory to it." Stark looked at the glowing panel on his desk. "I'm sure that you are aware, in as much as you are the 'Supreme Mugwump' of the International Confederation of Wizards, yet another instance of magical internationalism not recognized by any actual nations, that the United States Department of Magic is not an signatory to nor does it recognize or enforce your Statute of Secrecy, the same goes for the Canadian Ministry of Magic, and the Mexican Oficina Federal de Magia."
"You seem exceptionally well informed about the magical world and its workings Mr. Stark."
Dumbledore said trying to think of some way to salvage the situation.

"I'm raising a Wizard Mr. Dumbledore. I need to know how your world works. So why don't you tell me what you want, and why you are willing to break US laws to get it."

"As your assistant must have told you," Dumbledore said still somewhat surprised that Stark's electrical devices worked while he was in the room, "I am the Headmaster of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Yes she did. Now that you mention it, I recall my son telling me that he received an acceptance letter to your school, an offer that he declined."

"Harry Potter has been on our rolls since he was born."

"That's very interesting Mr. Dumbledore, but I don't see why you are here. You offered him enrollment, Harry declined. My son is happy at his present school. Why should he wish to cross the Atlantic to attend a boarding school for ten months out of the year?"

"Hogwarts is the premier school for magic in the world." Dumbledore said with pride.

"Really?" Stark had decided that he didn't like this man, not in the slightest. "What is your math department like? What sciences do you offer? Will an education at your school give Harry the grounding he needs to pursue his goal of becoming an engineer?"

"Our Arithmancy Mistress is without peer in the world."

"Arithmancy? I'm afraid I'm not familiar with that subject. Does your math department cover analytical geometry? Integral or differential Calculus?"

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with those subjects." Dumbledore said.

"Well, what about chemistry, biology, physics?"

"Not as such, no. We cover astronomy and our potions program is not terribly unlike chemistry."

"From what I've seen of the potions taught by the tutor I've hired for Harry, potions have far more in common with cooking than with chemistry Mr. Dumbledore."

"Our care of magical creatures class is certainly biological..." Dumbledore cursed himself for coming to speak to this man so ill prepared.

"So that's a no. What about history?"

"The History of Magic, certainly."

"I see." What did they teach at this school Stark wondered. "Little science, little history, depending upon what precisely 'arithmancy' is little math, what of your English department?"

"Excuse me? Why would we have an English department? Part of the requirement for attending Hogwarts is to be an English speaker." The Headmaster asked in confusion.

"So you don't teach them how to write? You don't introduce them to English language literature and poetry? You're a school in the nation that produced Shakespeare and you don't teach his words?"

"We at Hogwarts produce Witches and Wizards Mr. Stark."
"It sounds to me you produce Witches and Wizards without teaching them how to think or express themselves Mr. Dumbledore. So, just so we are clear, your school doesn't cover any of the basic subjects that would lead to Harry achieving his goals in life, wouldn't you say that was accurate?"

"Mr. Stark," Dumbledore responded, attempting to use his normal aura of grandfatherly wisdom. "One's life goals at eleven rarely survive to adulthood."

"That is true enough." Tony admitted. "When I was eleven I wanted to fly jet aircraft. It turned out that among other things I design the systems that allow jet aircraft to fly, AND fly them. An eleven year olds dreams should be allowed to grow, not be stifled Mr. Dumbledore."

"Might I at least be allowed to make the case to Harry that he has the opportunity to follow in his parents' footsteps and attend the school that they chose for him?"

Stark touched some controls on his desk and the mechanisms aimed at the Headmaster returned to their storage positions. The technologist stared at the school teacher for a moment. Stark then opened one of the drawers in his desk and removed a business card.

"Eight o'clock tonight at this address. I'll allow you to speak to my son. A word of warning old man. If you try any of your mind games with Harry or anyone else associated with me my magic-hardened defensive systems will make you wish you had never been born. I will turn what's left of you over to the Department of Magic to deal with. They owe me a few favors. You would probably have a most unpleasant stay."

Harry grabbed his favorite seat in the Great Hall for the first evening study group of the new school year. Hermione and Padma had taken it upon themselves to mentor a pair of the shyer first year Ravenclaws. Harry had looked around to see if any of the male firsties needed the same kind of assistance, but the four new boys all seemed to be bonding to each other well, so he wasn't needed. Since the girls were both showing their new charges around the castle, neither of his normal study partners would be around for a while.

"Oi Harry."

Harry looked up to find Ron Weasley from Gryffindor.

"Hi Ron. How was your summer?"

"Not bad. Harry, this is my sister Ginny." The tall redhead pulled a small girl, also with flaming red locks from behind him. "She's been bugging me to meet you all summer."

Not this again, Harry thought as he smiled. "Hi Ginny. Congratulations on getting into Gryffindor."

"Nice to meet you Harry." The girl said in a very small voice.

"Will you be joining our study group Ginny?"

"I don't know." She responded.

"I don't see the point myself." Ron sniffed. "We get enough of this during class. Hey, there's Ollie, I'll see you later Harry, and I'm going to find out when Ollie's scheduling the Quidditch tryouts." With that the redhead ran off.

"Quidditch crazy isn't he?" Harry asked of the young girl.
"You should see his room; it's a shrine to the Chudley Cannons." Ginny said, forgetting for the moment who she was speaking with

"So, you're in Gryffindor at the same time as four of your older brothers. I can see how that could be both an advantage and a disadvantage."

"Hmph." Ginny huffed. "I'll let you know when I find an advantage." She looked across the table at the roll of parchment he was writing on. "What are you working on?"

"Charms assignment. 'Six uses for warming charms not related to cooking or personal comfort.'"

"That sounds… interesting."

"You mean dull. Yeah it is, but you've got to build on a strong dull foundation if you want to achieve anything… I guess." Harry grinned. The girl seemed to have loosened up a bit. "How are your classes so far?"

"There's a lot of writing." Ginny said. "A lot more that Mum's classes prepared me for, but I think I'm getting the hang of things." The young girl spotted someone across the Great Hall. "There's Cassandra. She and I are working together in Herbology; I'm supposed to get with her to figure out what went wrong today." She rose from the table. "See you later Harry."

"Anytime Ginny." Harry smiled as he returned to his essay.

A relative quiet surrounded Harry for a moment before a familiar drawl announce Harry had another visitor.

"You need to be careful Harry."

"Evening Draco." Harry looked up and spotted Malfoy's entourage. "Vinnie, Greg, how are you guys doing?"

"Good Potter." Crabbe grunted while Goyle nodded.

"Why do I need to be careful Draco?"

"The Weasley girl." The blond boy said as if the three words explained everything.

"What about her?"

"She'll be looking to get her hooks into you."

"What? Draco, she's eleven."

"Eleven and poor. She's looking to improve her lot in life by marrying into a rich family."

"Draco, that's a horrible way to think. We're all way too young to worry about things like that." Harry smirked a bit thinking of Julie Power, "Besides, I like my girls a bit older and a whole lot more blond."

"I'm sure." Draco said looking across the Great Hall at one of the more developed sixth year Hufflepuffs, certain that this was likely the woman to whom Harry was referring. "But the fact remains, you are going to be a target for every girl looking to improve her standing. You need to protect yourself. Father had me memorize a lot of procedures to keep myself safe."

"Draco, what makes you think that anyone would think that being with me would improve their
standing? I mean my Dad has money, but it's all in the Mundane world, I doubt many here would know about that."

"Why?" Malfoy said incredulously. "You're the last Potter. You're rich."

"I am?" Harry felt oddly… blasé about this news. How strange, he thought, isn't being rich a good thing?

"The Potters are a rich family." Draco continued. "I mean, not Malfoy rich, but rich. You're the last Potter. The family fortune is all yours."

"Hmm. Maybe I better contact Gringotts at Christmas to investigate this. I wonder why no one ever said anything?"

"They probably thought you knew." Draco shrugged. "I mean, you're the Potter."

"Draco." Greg Goyle interrupted. "House meeting."

"Ah. We've got to go. House meeting tonight." The blond stood. "I've done a bit of research for our debates Harry. I'm going to destroy you this year."

"Woe is me." Harry grinned. "Goodnight Draco, you too Greg, Vinnie."

Hermione slid into the seat across from Harry with Melody Spinnet, the younger sister of Alicia the fourth year in Gryffindor at her side, while Padma and her new shadow, Luna Lovegood, sat to Harry's right.

"What was that all about?" Padma asked.

"Draco warning me about you gold digging Witches."

"Why would he do that?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, it turns out I'm rich." Harry explained.

"Of course you're rich. Your Dad's a billionaire."

"No, I mean rich in my own right. Draco says that I'm the last of the Potters and I inherit the family fortune."

"As if we would care if you're rich." Hermione huffed. There was a slight pause before the bushy haired witch continued. "How rich?"

"Down girl." Padma laughed.

"My Dad always spoke of the Potters as property owners." Melody said. "I think he rents some of his warehouse space from the Potter trust."

"They were property owners." Luna said from Padma's side. "I guess they are, I mean, since you're the last Potter. But you don't have to worry about Witches being after your money. Families as old as the Potters probably have at least one Marriage Contract on file for you."

There was a soft clatter as Harry dropped the fountain pen he was using to do his homework.

"Excuse me?"

The blond girl with the large gray eyes looked startled at his reaction. "I'm sorry, was that rude?"
What do you mean by `Marriage Contract'?" Harry asked.

"A magical contract used to ensure line mergers." Luna explained. "Not all that common anymore, but still in used by most of the older lines… Like the Potters."

Oh hell. Harry thought.

"Still," The blond continued. "Your father married a Muggle born, so it's possible that the Potters decided at some point not to do that anymore."

"Thank you Luna." Harry said as he hoped against hope that her last suggestion turned out to be true. "I hope you're right."

"You seem unusually knowledgeable about Harry's family Luna, why is that?" Padma asked with a sly smile.

"Oh, Daddy ran a series of articles in the Quibbler on Harry and his family following his adventure in front of the Wizengamot last year." Luna said airily before turning to Harry. "Daddy was most impressed with your friendship with the Odinson, in his last letter he asked me to ask you if you might be able to arrange an interview with the Thunder god."

"Thunder god?" Hermione asked looking up from her notes.

Harry shrugged. "I'll ask the next time I write. I don't know if Thor gives interviews."

"Daddy wants to confirm a report he found from the time of Merlin. An ancient manuscript he's uncovered claimed that Thor and his brother Loki followed Merlin himself around for a month pointing and laughing whenever he cast a spell."

Harry grinned. "That sounds like Thor. I don't know if he ever really hung out with Loki, they don't really get along."

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The girl pulled the drapes that hung above her bed closed with an impatient jerk. She then touched her wand to three very specific places on the headboard to reveal the hiding place for the diary. Tom had told her how to go about creating the space in the headboard, the man in the diary had given her specific instructions as to how to go about the difficult spell. It had been exhausting, that was how she knew she had done magic far in advance of her years.

Withdrawing the diary and her favorite self inking quill she began to write.

Hello Tom.

Hello. I have been waiting for you. What did you learn today?

There was a minor disaster in Herbology, but it's fixed now. The important news I've got is that I've met Harry Stark!

Did you? Tell me about him.
He's very nice. We spoke for a while, and I could tell he cared about what I had to say. It's unusual to find a second year boy who will pay attention to a little firstie like me.

Don't sell yourself short. I'm sure you two are meant for one another. Sometimes you have to take chances to secure your future.

I don't know Tom. Harry's nice and all, but he's so focused. Not focused like Ron or even Percy. I get the feeling that he couldn't care less about Quidditch or a future career, but focused toward goals. He wants to win. He doesn't really care about the game; it's winning that's important to him.

What did he say that gave you that impression?

Nothing. It is simply an impression I got from him, if you could speak with him Tom, you would understand. I was with him for only a short time, but…

As I've been telling you, you were meant for each other. The time has come for you to start taking the steps you will need to secure young Harry's attention. Riddle then explained what he wanted her to do.

You cannot be serious Tom. Why would I want to do any of those things?

To meet your destiny of course.

Tom Riddle pushed a bit more magic into the pages. The girl was resistant. It was time to take control.

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Padma stood next to the chalkboard with a piece of chalk in her hand. "Ok, does anyone have any suggestions?"

The second year Ravenclaws save one stared at the blank board.

"Maybe we should list the various disciplines." Terry Boot suggested. "Having the sources might make coming up with a fusion easier."

Padma turned back to the board and started listing the classes, starting with Potions.

"Is anyone planning on taking Divination?" Hermione asked. At the chorused 'no', Padma drew a line through that subject.

"What about Care of Magical Creatures?" Padma asked.

"I am. My family is in the Potions ingredient business, Care is a cornerstone." Michael Cornfoot said. "But in all honesty, I can't see that being used in a multi-discipline project."

"I'm not sure that the History of Magic will be a useful course for the project either." Su Li added.

Silence reigned for several moments as the assembled Ravenclaws continued to stare at the chalkboard.

"Come on people!" Lisa Turpin said. "We're supposed to be the brilliant house; at least one of us
must have an idea."

Anthony Goldstein looked around. "Where's Harry?"

"Harry said that he had an appointment this evening. He'll try to make it back before we finish." Hermione explained.

"I haven't got a single bloody idea." Terry said. "We've got fifty days before we've got to turn in the preliminary outlines, and I've got nothing."

"I think," Hermione said, "that rather that trying to think up something exciting and original to do, we should try to fix something about the school."

"Like what?" Anthony asked.

"Maybe before we decide what we're going to do, we should decide how we're going to do it." Padma said. "I mean, are we looking for a huge uber-project using all of us, will we each break off into individual projects, or will it be a mixture of both, with multi-person groups as well as singles?"

"The 'Puffs are banding together into a single project." Lisa said. "Something about personal wards. The Gryffs are all going their own way with individual efforts. I haven't heard what the Slytherins are doing, if anything."

"Has anyone asked Harry if he has any ideas?"

-===oooOOOooo===-

Harry knocked on the door to the Professor's office.

"Enter."

Entering the office, Harry crossed the room to stand in front of the desk, while the grey haired woman continued to write. Once she finished what she was working the woman looked up.

"Ah, Mr. Stark. I was a bit surprised to find your request for a meeting since you aren't in any of my classes, until I recalled you were a second year." The woman smiled. "Every year I get at least one Ravenclaw coming to me for suggestions of what they should do for their OWL project. I'm sorry Mr. Stark, no shortcuts are available here."

"I am here to speak to you about an idea for my project Professor Babbling, but the help I'm looking for is your evaluation of the feasibility that my project to determine if what I want to do can even be done."

Bathsheba Babbling felt a small sense of déjà vu. Lily Evans had approached her in exactly the same way with the beginning ideas of her project.

"Alright then Mr. Stark, Why don't you show me what you've got in mind."

Harry opened the folder he carried and began showing the Ancient Runes Professor what it was he wanted to do.

The meeting was scheduled for twenty minutes. The time for the end of the meeting came and passed without comment from either the Professor or Harry. At the one hour mark. Professor Babbling rose from her desk and crossed the room to the fireplace, took a pinch of floo powder and tossed it into the flames.
"Septima Vector."

"Yes Bathsheba?" the Arithmancy Professor's voice drifted from the hearth. Harry had never seen this method of communication before. He found himself wondering why no one had ever invented a magical intercom.

"Septima, I think you should come through to my office. There's something here I think you need to see." Babbling stepped back from the hearth and a few seconds later Professor Vector stepped out.

"Mr. Stark." Vector said. "I didn't expect to find you here."

"Mr. Stark came to me asking the feasibility of his proposed OWL Project. Take a look."

Vector leaned on the desk to examine Harry's notes and ideas.

"Morgana and Maeve." Vector breathed. She looked up at Harry. "Are you serious about this? Really serious?"

Harry shrugged. "If I can emulate the flow using runes, yes. As I see it I've got three possible outcomes, a spectacular failure being the most likely, a moderate success is possible, or something totally new to all of our experiences is a remote possibility. Only time and luck will tell."

"If you are planning to attempt this alone, I would agree that a spectacular failure is the most likely result." Vector said before diving once again into the drawings.

"Actually I'm hoping for a team of at least six. A mixture of Ravenclaw and Slytherin."

"No one from the other two houses?" Babbling asked.

"I've asked the 'Puffs I know and they're not interested in a project outside their own house, and none of the Gryffs I know were interested in tying their fortunes to a team. I haven't actually spoken to any of the Slytherins yet."

"Professor Vector and I were both in Slytherin in our youths." Babbling said. "I for one find it reassuring that you would include our old house in your plans." She sat at her desk. "What is your first step Mr. Stark?"

"As I see it, I have to find out if what I want to do can be done via magic. I will need a simple proof of concept device before I'm confident enough to bring it to those I'm considering for my team."

"I can't be part of the project, but I will want regular updates as to your progress." Septima Vector said.

"The same for me Mr. Stark." Babbling agreed. "I can help you with your proof of concept device. Shall we say each night at nine? I believe I can free up an hour."

Harry gathered his notes. "Thank you both. I really think this will help the school quite a bit. Good night."

After the door closed behind the boy, Septima turned to the older witch. "I think I might be around for his hour sessions as well. Do you think he can do it?"

Babbling shook her head. "I have no idea. We've discussed wanting to try this before Septima, but we had no idea where or how to start. Mr. Stark seems to know the starting point at very least."

…-===ooo000ooo===-…
Hermione woke slowly. Saturday morning. Her second birthday at Hogwarts. She smiled to her self recalling how down she had been last year. She rose and made her way to the bath, and rushed through her morning rituals. Returning to her room, she dug in her trunk to find the headscarf and blouse that Padma and Harry had given her the year before. After she had dressed, she found her parent letter for the week. Despite having the Stark Messaging device that they could use to send letters at anytime this year her parents had persisted in supplying her with a letter for each Saturday of the term before she left home. Hermione read her letter, feeling the love of her parents wash over her. She wasn't as lonely this year as last, her friendships with Harry and Padma and the rest of the house gave her a sense of belonging she had never known before.

She opened the gift and smiled. A beautiful wristwatch. Mum strikes again. She knew it was her mother because Daddy would have gotten her something little girlish or a book. She sat for a moment imagining her parents and what they would be doing today.

Hermione stood from her bed and tied the scarf around her unruly locks, then put one her eye patch and tucked her plastic sword into the sash around her waist, before making her way down the stairs.

"Avast ye swabs! Where be my faithful crew? Yarr!" she said bursting through the door to the common room.

The Ravenclaw common room had perhaps a dozen members of the house in residence, all of whom turned to look at Hermione in her pirate gear like they were looking at an escaped lunatic for perhaps fifteen seconds before everyone in the room returned to their prior conversations and studies.

Somewhat embarrassed by the utter lack of pirate related clothing in the common room, and mortally embarrassed by her entrance to the Common Room, Hermione crossed the room to the table where a smiling Padma and a laughing Harry sat.

"Am I to assume that we aren't doing the pirate thing this year?" Hermione said through clinched teeth.

"Wasn't planning on it." Harry gasped out between bouts of laughter.

"You should have seen your face Captain." Padma giggled. "What made you think we were going to repeat ourselves?'"

"We had fun. I thought we would have fun again."

"But you're not a kid anymore Hermione. You hit the big One-Three. You're a teenager now; you have to leave childish things behind you." Harry grinned. "I think I'm gonna call you 'Granny'."

"As long as you don't mind me calling you dead." Hermione said sweetly, pulling the scarf from her head and sitting at the table. Her favorite breakfast foods suddenly appeared in front of her.

"Oh." Hermione said. "You did have something planned."

"Of course we did." Padma laughed as she pushed a delicately wrapped gift across the table. "We just didn't expect you to make an entrance."

"Though it was quite entertaining." Harry agreed setting his own gift in front of the brand new teenager. "So I guess you'll be ditching us to hang out with the other teenaged girls, doing your hair and nails, and gossiping about the 'hot guys', right?"

"Harry, you are such a prat." Hermione said smacking his arm.
"Yes he is, but at least he's housebroken."

"Hey! This is picking on Hermione because she's getting old day." Harry groused.

The trio's banter was interrupted by a shout.

"I said no Tom! I won't do those terrible things. You can't make me!"

Harry looked over. It was Padma's friend Luna and she was shouting at a… a book? The blond girl rose from her chair, gripping a small black book as if it were likely to attack her, and marched over to the table the trio sat at.

"This is for you Harry." She said her face a mask of rage. "This unspeakable… bastard wants me to talk to you, to seduce you, and he's trying to make me kill some helpless chickens. You take him."

"Seduce me?" Harry asked incredulously amazed at the level of hatred the girl was emoting against a book. "This book wants you to seduce me?"

"Yes. Write in it."

Harry examined the cover of the leather bound volume, finding a barely readable 'T. M. Riddle' embossed on the cover. Wondering for a moment who T. might be, Harry pulled his fountain pen from the inside pocket of his robes and opened the book. It appeared to be nothing more than a cheap personal diary. Flipping through the pages he found that they were all blank.

Hello? He wrote. After a few seconds the ink seemed to be absorbed into the page.

Hello. Faded into view on the page. You're not Luna, to whom am I speaking?

My name is Harry Stark.

Harry! I so wanted to meet you. My name is Tom.

"Oh, that's not right." Padma breathed.

"I agree." Hermione said. "No inanimate object should be that self aware."

Harry closed the book, and stared at it for a moment. "I'm going to turn this thing over Professor Flitwick." He looked up into the face of the now calmer Luna Lovegood. "You should come too Luna, the professor will probably have questions about this thing."

August 12, 1991

New York City

Stark Estate:

"Harry, this is Professor Dumbledore, he's the headmaster from that school that sent you that acceptance letter via the owl."

The young man couldn't quite keep the surprise off his face when he saw the odd manner of dress of the older Wizard. "Nice to meet you Professor. I'd never gotten a letter via owl before, and I wasn't
sure it wasn't all an overly complex joke from some friends."

The old man smiled. "The Post Owl has a long and honored history in European magical society Mr. Potter."

"Stark." The boy said.

"Excuse me?" Dumbledore said.

"My name is Harry Stark Professor. I left being a Potter behind when my life began."

That was an odd turn of phrase, Dumbledore thought. When his life began. "Very well Mr. Stark, as you wish. I am here to offer you your place at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"What's the difference?" Harry asked.

That question confused Dumbledore. "Excuse me?"

"You said that your school was one of witchcraft and wizardry. What is the difference between witchcraft and wizardry?"

"Well, there is no difference really, that's just always been the name of the school."

"So tradition is a good reason to do redundant things? I mean wouldn't calling it a school of magic be far more accurate?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore saw that the boy was asking from honest curiosity rather than snark. But still, to question the name of Hogwarts? "Perhaps that is something I should think about."

"Patronizing me Professor? I think we both know you aren't going to even think about changing the name of your school. But still, to question the name of Hogwarts? "Perhaps that is something I should think about."

"Of course they were Harry."

The boy shrugged. "I recall my Uncle telling me that they were both alcoholics who died in a drinking related car accident, the accident that gave me this scar." The young man indicated his forehead. "If they were magical, why would he have told me that?"

"Truly Harry, I've never really understood why Vernon Dursley did half the things he did." Dumbledore said trying to think of some way to salvage the situation. "James and Lily Potter were anything but Alcoholics. Their deaths were hardly an accident, they were murdered. In the short time they had with you, they loved you with all their hearts."

"I'm sure they did Professor, most parents do."

"They wanted you to attend Hogwarts my boy. They signed you into the class as soon as your magic was confirmed Harry. Your attending the school they both loved so much was their fondest wish."

"Really? Odd that they didn't see fit to arrange for a caring home for me. I have no memories of the Potters, but I remember the Dursleys. I remember the punishments and the name calling and the
pain. I remember being hungry all the time. I remember watching their son opening Christmas gifts while I received nothing.” The boy fixed the old man with a glare. “There is something going on here that you’re not telling me. I find it hard to believe that the Headmaster of a major school of magic would expend as much energy in tracking down a legacy student as you have with me.”

“Mr. Potter, you have a destiny, your parents…”

“Professor Dumbledore, that man sitting right there is my father.” Harry gestured toward the elder Stark. “The woman I think of as my mother is probably getting home about now because she’s a perfectionist who works far too many hours. Despite this she has been at every school function I’ve ever been part of. I have so many surrogate aunts and uncles who care for me I can’t begin to estimate how lucky I am. You sir, are lying to me, about what, I don’t know, but you’re lying.”

“Smart kid I’ve got there, wouldn’t you say Professor?” Tony said from his chair.

Albus Dumbledore was in the midst of a most unusual experience. He was being told no and his wise counsel was being actively ignored. Harry Potter had to attend Hogwarts. If he didn’t there was no way to stop Tom from returning.

“I have other business in the United States that will keep me in the country for another day.” The old man said, while he produced a small pile of pamphlets with a flick of his wand. “I would like to leave you these handouts to peruse. Perhaps I could stop by tomorrow evening before I leave?”

The elder Stark held the older man’s gaze for a few moments, and then nodded. “I don’t see a problem with that Professor.”

Jarvis appeared at the door with Dumbledore’s hat. Harry reflected that someday he was going to figure out how Jarvis always knew when Dad was finished with a visitor. The Starks were silent as their visitor was escorted from the house.

“Very astute Harry. I wasn't sure that you would spot what he was doing.”

Harry shook his head. “I wonder what’s going on that he wants me at that school so badly.”

“If his school is anything like the one my father sent me to, your attendance is probably tied to some sort of bequest. Odd though, the Dursleys didn't seem all that wealthy… Perhaps it’s tied to your paternal heritage.”

“Is it ok that I want to stay here?” Harry asked.

“Yes you rotten kid. Fishing for compliments? How pathetic is that?”

“Hey, even us superior kids need the occasional ego stroke. Besides, without me around who would keep Frank in line?”

Tony Stark stood and wrapped his son in a hug. "Always the humanitarian Harry. You know of course I’m going to tell Pepper you think of her as your mother.”

The boy paled. "No! You know what she’ll do.”

"Yep. Better you than me kiddo.”

…-====oooo0000oo==-…

A/N: A few thoughts.
Thanks for the reviews, both the picks and the pans.

One particular review brought me pause:

_Hhaahahaha! Wow! For how old you are, you're really good at writing young people._

What can I say to that, other than "Get off my lawn, you young whippersnapper. Quit listening to that horrible music, it'll rot your mind, and get a haircut!"

[ahem]

Ok, my notes from the last chapter caused some people to believe I'm discontinuing this story. No, what I'm discontinuing is the 'who's who' unless I introduce more than one or two new characters from the Marvel universe.

There's a lot of Ginny hate out there, and I have to admit that I have a rather checkered history with writing the youngest Weasley. There will be no Ginny bashing, and as far as I've got plotted out she isn't going to be the slut I usually write her. I'm not going to be picking on her brother either. I've done too much of this in the past.

A few reviewers (from the user names, I'm guessing mostly women) seemed to believe that I've got Harry and Neville 'noticing girls' too early. I think I'm going to break a bit of gender security here (almost on par with what you ladies do when you all head off to the restroom in groups): Most of that 'Girls are icky' stuff from most boys is for public consumption. I recall most vivid fevered imaginings about a simply gorgeous classmate from 4th -8 th grade (call it 9 through 14), named Audrey Stoner, long before I was biologically capable of anything at all, I knew I wanted to be with that young lady. Conversations with friends at that time usually drifted toward girls during those ages as well. Audrey was of course was completely unaware that I existed. [sigh] Anyway, preteen boys notice girls. Really they do. Most men will tell you that, if their honest.

Omake:

I think that with this chapter it becomes very evident that canon is now a distant memory, and there is zero chance of Ginny opening the chamber and releasing the basilisk… But how could I let that scene go untold?

The dark haired man waved Harry's wand once, and the letters of his name rearranged themselves:

_I AM LORD VOLDEMORT_

"You see?" he whispered. "It was a name I was already using at Hogwarts, to my most intimate friends only, of course. You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father's name forever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother's side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch?"
"You anagramized your name? Are you kidding me? You chose your nom de guerre by anagramizing your name? How old were you when you decided that was a good idea? Seven?"

"No, Harry, I fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!"

Harry just stared at the shade of the Dark Lord's teenaged self, and started to laugh. "The greatest sorcerer in the world? You? You've got to be kidding me."

"What's so funny?" snapped Riddle.

"You're not the greatest sorcerer in the world," said Harry, gasping for breath. "Sorry to disappoint you and all that, but the greatest sorcerer in this and any other world is a man named Steven Strange. Hell if you even qualify as a sorcerer, you wouldn't even be in the top five hundred. All you became is the primary nightmare of a very small inbred society too frightened to stand up to you."

The smile had gone from Riddle's face, to be replaced by a very ugly look.

"If this Steven Strange is so powerful why isn't she here to face me?" he hissed.

"You aren't worth his time you delusional idiot." Harry snorted. "I always get stuck dealing with his skut work."

Riddle opened his mouth to respond, and then seemingly changed his mind.

"Now, Harry, I'm going to teach you a little lesson. Let's match the powers of Lord Voldemort, Heir of Salazar Slytherin, against famous Harry Potter…" Riddle strode to the space between the high pillars and look up into the stone face of Slytherin, high above him in the half-darkness. Riddle opened his mouth wide and hissed, but Harry understood what he was saying…

"Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four."

Harry turned to look up at the statue, was this imitation of a teenaged Riddle actually going to call for the Basilisk? That question was answered when Slytherin's gigantic stone face was moving. Harry watched the statues mouth opening, wider and wider, to make a huge black hole, and something was stirring inside the statue's mouth. Something was slithering up from its depths.

Harry knew then that he had no choice any longer, "Techsuit:" he said quietly shrugging off his work robes. "Power up." The vibranium/ceramic armor stiffened as the powertap system tapped into Harry's magic and powered up the suit. From his belt Harry removed the helmet that transitioned from a cloth like rag to a rigid shell as soon as it made contact with the collar of his tech suit. Gloves slid onto his hands and became hard as steel. "Techsuit: Sonar mode"

The eye slits of the helmet's faceplate irised shut and the internal heads up display initialized.

Something huge hit the stone floor of the Chamber. Harry felt the ground shudder, almost instantly the Techsuit's AI built an image of the huge monster snake on the HUD. Harry hoped that he wasn't going to have to fight this monster, but…

"What is that?" Riddle found himself staring at the blue and bronze armor clad form that had replaced the Potter boy. "Do you actually believe that mere armor would protect you from the King of the Serpents?" Riddle hissed an order to the basilisk. "Kill him."

"You have a choice" Harry hissed in return as a pair of structures unfolded from the shoulders of the armor. "You have lived a thousand years creature, attack me and you die today. The world has
changed since the time of Slytherin."

The huge snake never responded, and moved to strike.

Harry triggered his sound system, and the crow of several dozen roosters ripped through the air.

The basilisk froze in mid strike, and then started convulsing in agony as the crows of the cockerels destroyed its nervous system. It took most of a minute but the snake finally died.

The shade of Riddle stood staring as the pods folded back into the shoulders of Harry's armor. "What the hell was that?"

"Five thousand watts of Dolby sound reproducing the crow of several roosters better than the original. One of the advances made since your time Tom." Harry said as he strode to the body of the snake and grasped one of the exposed fangs and pulled.

The venom from the fang hissed as it ate into the palm of his gauntlet. "Everything seems to be tied to this diary. This anchors you doesn't it?" Harry said gesturing to the small back book. "I'm tempted to try my laser on it... That's something else you don't know about Tom. I recall someone tried to burn this thing, but it was fireproof. I wonder if it could stand up the temperatures of the surface of the sun? An experiment for another time." Harry raised the fan and drove it into the small black book, "Sometimes you've got to go with the classics. Oh by the way. My name is Stark."

Harry wondered for a moment if it was wrong to enjoy the screams of the teenaged Riddle quite so much.

Omake:

Ben Russell-Gough came up with this idea for the aftermath of Hermione's entrance to the common room:

"Avast ye swabs! Where be my faithful crew? Yarr!" she said bursting through the door to the common room.

The Ravenclaw common room had perhaps a dozen members of the house in residence, all of whom turned to look at Hermione in her pirate gear like they were looking at an escaped lunatic for perhaps fifteen seconds before everyone in the room returned to their prior conversations and studies.

"Who's that?" the pureblood first year looked at the muggleborn witch in horror.

"Granger," was Marietta Edgecombe's terse response.

"What's she doing?"

"Celebrating her birthday."

"By dressing up like that and talking like an escaped lunatic?"

"Yep," Marietta said. After a moment, the dark-haired third-year decided that she should elaborate, if only to impress the Firstie with her wisdom. "Granger was born on something called International Talk Like A Pirate Day, so she acts like that on her birthday. I think it is some kind of compulsion charm put on muggle kids at birth who are born on this date."

"Oh."
Harry Potter and The Invincible TechnoMage

Chapter Thirteen - Year Two Proposals.

August 13, 1991

… Somewhere

Harry woke to find himself standing on a featureless plane tinted in reds and purples. Sitting in front of him on a black throne like chair was a woman clad in a black flowing gown with red highlights in spider motif, the grey haired woman's eyes were covered with a red band of fabric. She turned to face him.

"Good evening Mr. Stark. I am Cassandra Webb. I brought you here that we might discuss your futures."

The boy nodded and continued to look around the plane he had found himself in. "Weird dream," he murmured. "I wonder what brought this on… Mistress Harkness' lessons today were a bit more intense than usual. This is just... weird."

"This is no dream Mr. Stark"

"Uh huh." The boy agreed. "Maybe it was the curry." He examined the throne the woman sat upon. "I've got no idea what my subconscious is trying to tell me, but this one is a doozy."

A smile creased the old woman's face. "I promise you Mr. Stark, you aren't dreaming. I am known as Madame Web. I brought you here to speak to you about your futures."

A swivel chair appeared next to Harry. He looked at it and smiled. "OK." The boy sat down. "Not a dream. Dream things are happening, but it's not a dream."

"I call this the Mindscape Mr. Stark. I am gifted with the ability to see all the possible futures that may come. Recently I have found myself focused on your futures."

"Futures? Harry asked. "As in plural? How can a person have more than one future?"

"We all have a near infinite number of possible futures Mr. Stark. Every decision you make, every decision made for you changes what your final destination might be."

"Right." The boy agreed in a manner that clearly showed he didn't believe a word she was sayings.
"You know it's odd, the colors here are so vivid. I almost never dream in color."

The woman's brow furrowed. "Do you smell that Mr. Stark?"

"Hey lemons. Nice."

"Do you ever recall smelling anything while dreaming Mr. Stark?"

Harry paled noticeably. "No. I've never smelled anything in a dream." He then jerked his hand away from the arm rest of the chair he was sitting on. "Ow!"

"And pain. Have you ever felt pain in a dream Mr. Stark?"

"No."

"You aren't dreaming Mr. Stark. Our time here is short, we should move on. You have been offered a place at the Hogwarts School of Magic."

"School of Witchcraft and Wizardry" Harry corrected her while still examining his hand for any sign of damage. Nothing he could see, yet the pain was definitely there. Harry attempted to cast a simple healing charm. Nothing. Yep, this is all a dream, an especially vivid dream, but a dream. Magic never works in dreams.

"Like there's a difference." The woman again smiled. "The offer to attend Hogwarts is a major cusp of your life Mr. Stark. Your exact futures are still vague, but I can tell you that you are yet again going to be the target of a madman."

Harry sat up in the chair. "Yet again? Are you saying that if I go to that school I'll be attacked?"

"Your foe sought you out as an infant, and he will seek you out in the future no matter if you go or if you stay. You will always be his ultimate target, but he will kill many people before he finds you."

"So I should go?"

The woman frowned. "I cannot tell you what you should do Mr. Stark. Your choices are your own. I cannot tell you if you will succeed against your opponent in either case. I can tell you that fewer innocents will die if you indeed attend the Hogwarts School."

Harry shook his head. "I think you've got the wrong Stark. My Dad is the one who finances the Avengers; he could probably take care of this for you."

The blind woman's expression softened. "No Mr. Stark, Mr. Harry James Stark, born Harry Potter to Lily and James Potter. You will be the hero of your story. It is your destiny in all of your futures. For all of their power the Avengers would likely fail. My gift tells me that you are the only one who has any chance of success against your foe."

The boy stared at the woman. "And fewer people will die if I go to this school?"

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August 13, 1991

New York City

Stark Estate:
Harry's alarm buzzed. Six thirty. That was one weird dream. Odd that it wasn't fading as dreams usually did.

The eleven year old rolled out of his bed and stretched, rotating his shoulders and hips. He made a quick stop in the bathroom to brush his teeth and void his bladder. Dressing quickly he made his way out to the lawn to stretch.

Seven am on the dot, the big man arrived.

"Good Morning Trooper."

"Morning Steve. How far are we going today?"

"Just a light run I think. Three miles ought to do it."

The pair did their run, and then sparred for an hour. Following their morning workout the man and the boy retired to the house to shower. It was eight forty-five when the pair sat down in the kitchen of the estate for breakfast.

"You were saying something about a weird dream on the run?" Steve Rogers asked.

"Yeah. Really weird. There was a woman. She had to be in her sixties at least."

"Dreaming about older women Harry?" Jarvis teased as he brought a cup of coffee for the Captain. "First Miss Power, and now a truly older woman."

"You're a card Jarvis. If this butlering thing doesn't work out I hear Johnny Carson is retiring next year. It was probably your curry that made me dream about Madame Web anyway."

"Madame Web?" Rogers asked suddenly perking up. "Describe her."

"Like I said, I would guess she is in her sixties, black hair, graying up. She had a red ribbon across her eyes, she might have been blind. There was a sort of... I don't know, sort of a red spider on the front of her dress."

"Hmm."

The phone rang. Jarvis lifted the receiver and answered in his best Butler voice. "Stark Residence."

The man listened for a moment. "One moment."

"It's for you Harry."

"For me?" This was odd. Harry couldn't think of any of his friends that would be up this early during summer vacation. He took the receiver and raised it to his ear. "Harry Stark."

"It wasn't a dream Mr. Stark." A woman's voice before the line went dead.

Harry just lowered the receiver and stared at it. Not a dream?

Oh my god.

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Filus Flitwick paused to lock his office. Saturday mornings were his favorite times of the week. A
Saturday morning meant a leisurely breakfast while burying himself in a good book. This morning had been slightly spoiled by his discovery that he had left the latest of Sue Grafton's alphabet series novels in his office. 'I is for Innocent', such an intriguing title.

Having paused to cast a warming charm on his breakfast; the small man padded his way to his office in slippers and dressing gown. Having retrieved his book he was in the process of locking his office door when an inevitable voice broke the silence.

"Professor Flitwick?"

Filius turned to find Harry Stark with a young first year in tow… Lovegood. Yes, Luna Lovegood.

"Good morning Mr. Stark. I'm afraid my office hours aren't until three."

"This isn't academic Professor," the boy said. "It's a safety issue."

That gave the older man pause. "Safety Mr. Stark? Please explain."

"It's this diary sir. It seems to be… aware." Stark said offering the book.

"Excuse me?"

"When you write in it, it responds" the young girl offered. "It calls itself Tom. He wanted me to kill Hagrid’s chickens and seduce Harry." Luna suddenly found the floor to be exceptionally interesting while a blush spread across her features.

His curiosity piqued, Filius wedged his Grafton book under his left arm and accepted the small black book from his student. Turning it over in his hands Filius opened the book to the first page, where he found the name T.M. Riddle written in smudged ink.

The charms master fought to stifle a gasp of surprise. Riddle? "The book calls itself Tom you say?"

Both of the students nodded.

Filius drew his wand and sealed the diary shut with three of the most powerful security charms he knew, then added a fourth he had learned from the Brethren. Sliding the diary into the pocket of his dressing gown he turned back to the children. "Come into my office, I think I need to hear the story behind 'Tom'."

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Flitwick gestured at the doorway and it slid open. Albus looked up in surprise. The Headmaster was well aware that Filius had the capability of entering his office so cavalierly, but had never thought that the Charms Master would ever actually do so.

"Filius?"

"Albus, we need to talk. Tom Riddle is making his presence known once again."

"What?" the old man gasped, had another wizard been possessed? "What do you mean?"

"One of my new students arrived at school with this." The small man removed the diary from the pocket of his dressing gown and slid it across the desk to the Headmaster.

"Tom's boyhood diary?" The old man whispered when he cancelled the security charms and opened the diary to the first page to see the smeared name. "Odd that it's empty. With his opinion of himself,
I would have thought he would have poured his soul into such a book."

"I think he did." Filius said. "Write in it."

Dumbledore blinked at his Charms Master, then took up a quill and in his precise flowing hand wrote; 'I am Albus Dumbledore.'

The words shone momentarily on the page and then they sank into the page without trace. After a moment, something happened.

Oozing back out of the page, in the Headmaster's own ink, came words that Albus had never written.

'Hello, Professor Dumbledore. I understand that congratulations are in order for your elevation to the post of Headmaster. I've not had so many visitors in years. First sweet young Luna Lovegood, then Harry Potter, who shames his heritage by taking a disgusting Muggle name, Professor Flitwick, and now you. How did you come by my diary?'

These words, too, faded away, but not before Albus muttered to himself. "Oh, Tom, surely not…"

"Miss Lovegood tells me that she found this diary among her school things upon returning from Diagon Alley in late July. She knows that it was not among the items purchased by her father on her behalf, and suspects that it came from a chance encounter with 'Uncle Lucius'." Flitwick explained. "She took the diary to be little more than a book carrying a modified Mirror charm, though one with a most forceful personality."

"And how did Mr. Stark encounter the diary?"

"Tom Riddle's personality seemed to be attempting to guide her toward a relationship with Mr. Stark for reasons known only to this book. After the diary made one demand of the young girl too many, she presented the book to Mr. Stark in the company of his usual companions, Miss Patil and Miss Granger. Mr. Stark wrote in the book at Miss Lovegood's direction, and Tom's response had him bringing the diary to me."

Albus used his wand to cut into the palm of his left hand, dripping several drops of blood onto the worn cover of the diary. The ancient wizard then moved his wand over the book in a clockwise spiral while intoning, "ostendo mihi vestri specialis"

A smoky spectral skull formed over the book. Dumbledore's eyes took on a hard glint.

"'Ostendo sum volo' showed much the same thing." Filius commented from where he was pacing. "This makes twice in two years Tom Riddle has made an appearance at our school Albus. Both times since the reappearance of Mr. Stark into our society. Logic tells me that he is making attempts on the boy."

That gave the older man pause. "I'm not certain of that Filius. Riddle's goal last year was the Stone. This," He gestured to the diary. "Seems to be more of an accident than anything else."

"Hmm." The Charms Master murmured in contemplation. "I hope you're right. What are we going to do about it?"

"Excuse me?"

"Someone, quite likely Lucius Malfoy sent this accursed thing to our school. This cannot go unanswered Albus. Think about it. Among the things this book wanted was for Miss Lovegood to kill Hagrid's roosters. Doesn't that ring any bells?"
Dumbledore blinked as he made the associations. "The Chamber."

"You long suspected that Tom was behind the opening of the Chamber when he was a student. Now we have what appears to be a portion of Tom Riddle's soul setting up a young girl to open it again."

Flitwick drew himself to his full height and straightened his robes. "This cannot be allowed to stand Albus. At bare minimum, a message must be sent."

"What message?"

"That the appearance of any other examples of Tom Riddle's childhood things suddenly appearing at Hogwarts would likely provoke an unfortunate response."

"Filius!"

Filius Flitwick nodded. "I understand how you feel about these things Albus. However, certain truths must be recognized. Lucius Malfoy was a loathsome little boy when he was here, and the years have not improved him. If I find that he had anything to do with sending this abomination into my house, he will regret having ever been born."

"Filius!" Dumbledore protested.

"And I'm informing her father. Xeno deserves to know what almost happened."

"I know your relationship with Xeno Lovegood Filius, but you must know he'll blow this situation completely out of proportion."

"His daughter was almost possessed by a dark artifact Albus, what is the correct proportion for such a thing?"

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"Thank you for coming." Harry said from his place facing the tables of the disused classroom.

"What's this about Stark?" Blaise Zabini asked.

Harry looked out at the assembled group of Ravenclaw and Slytherin second years. "I've asked you here to discuss an OWL project idea I've had."

That statement brought silence to the room. The majority of the Ravenclaws had at least tentative plans for their projects, though few were truly happy with what they had chosen. The Slytherins were a harder read. None of their expressions betrayed the slightest bit of interest—or disinterest. As a group they all seemed to aspire to an outward appearance of utter neutrality.

Harry held up the storage crystal he had been given when the second year Ravenclaws had been introduced to the Ravenclaw Library. "This crystal contains images of the pages of an entire book. The first year Potions text to be specific."

The assembled Ravenclaw students offered expressions that could be summed up as 'Yeah, and?'

"I think we've all heard about the mythical Ravenclaw library," A tiny blond girl wearing Slytherin robes said. "It's already been done. How can this be an OWL Project?"

"The Ravenclaw Library has most definitely already been done," Harry admitted. "Tracey Davis, right?" The girl nodded and Harry continued. "What I'm proposing Tracey is that we improve on it. This crystal contains images of every page, but that's all it contains. The image resolution is very
clear, but page acquisition is very slow, almost two seconds per page. There is no way to search for specific sections; there is no index, no way to relate sections of one book to related information in another."

"That would take a computer to do that." Kevin Entwhistle said. "And computers don't work here…" He paused. "Well yours do, but… How could this be an OWL project?"

"Computer?" Daphne Greengrass asked. "What is a computer?"

"A computer is a mundane device that processes data." Harry explained. "Information is reduced to numerical values and then manipulated at high speed."

"To what end?" she asked.

Harry shrugged. "Information is power. The ability to interpret and extrapolate data is an advantage. I am not proposing that we attempt to duplicate the work my father has done to allow mundane technology to work around magic. I want us to develop a magical computer, a device capable of making the entirety of the Hogwarts Library available to every student in an indexed searchable format."

Theodore Nott looked skeptical. "Even if it's possible, to what end? What you are proposing sounds like it would be a whole lot of work, I don't see the profit in it."

"There probably won't be a profit in it." Harry admitted. "And it will be a whole lot of work. We will be attempting to do in four years with magic what took the Mundanes most of seven hundred years to achieve."

"I don't know Harry." Hermione said chewing her lower lip. "A magical computer? How can that even be possible?"

"The idea of a computer defines a process more than a particular machine Hermione. There have been clockwork computers, steam powered 'analytical engines', I've even seen a computer that works on hydraulics. I'm convinced we can do this. I'm hoping for a team of at least six, but as many of us as I can get."

"Stark," Vinnie Crabbe said from his seat next to Draco. "I haven't understood a single word you've said since you said a whole book is in that crystal. I dunno what you would want from me."

"Vinnie, I think you sell yourself short. Let's be realistic here. I think there's a seventy five percent chance that this project is going to fail spectacularly. We'll probably end up in Hogwarts: A History under the heading Stupidest Idea for an OWL Project, Ever. There's probably a twenty percent chance that we'll end up with something equal to or possibly slightly more capable than the current Ravenclaw Reader. But, and it's a big but, there's a five percent chance that we'll come up with something that no one has ever seen before." Harry shrugged. "It's like my Dad says, no guts no glory. There's going to be plenty of work to go around. If you want in Vinnie, I promise I'll keep you busy and make sure you know what we're doing every step of the way."

Su Li appeared intrigued. "Professor Flitwick did say that a thoughtful methodology was at least as important as a successful project…"

"What makes you think you can do this Harry?" Draco Malfoy asked.

"To tell you the truth, I wasn't sure until last night. That's when I managed to get this working."

From his book bag Harry pulled a block of sandstone with dozens of runes carved into its surface. The Raven haired wizard tapped it with his wand. And a light appeared over the top of the block. It
hung there for a moment, and then winked out as a second light lit, then the first light joined it.

"What is it?" Padma asked as she watched the first two lights wink out as a third came on.

"This is my proof of concept device. It's an eight bit counter. A basic device that is powered only by the ambient magic of this room." Harry explained excitedly. "This is the first stepping stone to an honest to god computer."

The room was quiet for a short moment as the assembled students watched the device continue to count up in binary lights. The silence was broken by Draco Malfoy.

"Good one Harry, you had me going for a moment there." The blond stood up. "Good joke, unless you're serious, in which case you're crazy. I think I'll stick to the project we came up with on our own." Draco turned to Crabbe and Goyle. "Let's go."

Malfoy's bookends rose from their seats, with Crabbe giving one last wistful look at the counter before following his leader out of the room.

Theo Nott followed Malfoy without a backward glance. The bulk of the Ravenclaws left as well.

Tracey Davis stood up and approached the table where the counter sat, still counting up. "That's binary isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I've read about binary math." The strawberry blond looked up into Harry's eyes. "I'm in. When do we meet?"

"Don't know yet."

"You'll be using runes and Arithmancy." Daphne Greengrass noted.

"And Transfiguration, and more than a few charms." Harry agreed.

"Do you really think you're going to fail?" Millicent Bulstrode asked.

"It's a possibility, but no, not at all. It won't be easy, but if we can get enough people working on it, I'm sure we can do this. That being said, I'm a firm believer in the Great God Murphy, and have to recognize that the odds are against us."

"Murphy?" Zabini asked.

"It's a Muggle thing." Hermione explained. "Murphy's Law tells us that anything that can go wrong will go wrong."

"And anything that does go wrong will get progressively worse." Kevin Entwhistle added with a smile.

"And if you survive the first two laws it's time to panic." Tracey Davis concluded.

"Which is why you build safeties into your hardware, breakpoints in your software," Harry said in a serious tone, "and fail safes in your plans."

"I don't understand." Padma said. "What did you mean by that?"

"Hardware is your physical machine; a safety is a mechanical means of preventing the machine from
hurting you or itself. Software is the programming, the code that tells the machine what to do, think of the sum of what you've learned in your life as your brain's software. A breakpoint is a specific point in the code used to stop the execution of the code for testing purposes."

"And the fail safe for your plan is…" Hermione asked.

"I believe we can do this, but to be safe I want the expected result of our project to be a bit less ambitious. I was thinking a calculator." Harry paused while he pulled a pair of off the shelf calculators and passed them around to the students with no contact with the mundane world. "A runic calculator would be invaluable in Arithmancy, Astronomy, and Ancient Runes. Such a calculator would be several orders of magnitude less complex than the full fledged computer that would be our real goal, but would also be a more than adequate project result if we run into problems we can't overcome by the time the project is due for OWLs."

"So we promise a calculator and try to deliver a full computer? I'm in Harry." Kevin said.

Daphne and Millicent shared a look. "And us." Millie said.

Harry looked to Padma and Hermione.

"You have to ask?" Hermione said with a smile.

"When is the first organizational meeting?" Su asked.

Harry grinned. "Saturday after lunch good for everyone?"

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August 13, 1991

New York City

Stark Estate:

Harry sat down from the phone call barely aware that he had done so.

"Problem Trooper?" Steve Rogers asked.

Harry looked up into the eyes of the living legend his mind racing.

"I'm ok." Harry lied in that instant denial common to early adolescents. "Just a friend goofing on me."

That seemed to satisfy the big man, who returned to his meal.

A mad man is after me?

Harry's mind raced. Sure, he and Franklyn and the Power kids had gone out and done the hero thing a few times, but this wasn't some costumed idiot chasing Pulse as a member of the Power Pack, this was a lunatic after Harry Stark.

What am I going to do?
The boy wondered.

*If I go, I'm a target, if I stay people die and I'm still a target. What am I going to do?*

Who could he talk to? Harry suspected that his father would forbid any action on his part and immediately surround him with the highest security available… An idea that certainly had merit, but somehow seemed wrong.

Harry sat up in his chair, blinking.

*I'm an idiot*

. He thought.

"Steve?"

Rogers lowered his newspaper. "Yes Harry?"

"Would you mind if I asked a couple questions about the War?"

When speaking to Steve Rogers about 'the War' there could only be a single conflict under discussion. World War 2. Harry knew that the Captain didn't like discussing his past.

"What did you want to know Harry?"

"It's more a question about the choices you made than anything about the war." Harry hesitated. "According to what I've read in the Avengers Database you tried to enlist in July of 1939."

"I did. The day after my twenty second birthday. The recruiting sergeant all but laughed me out of the room."

"The US didn't get into the war for another two and a half years."Harry paused searching for the words, "Why did you..."

"Why was I jumping the gun?" Rogers smiled. "It's hard to explain Harry. You have to remember the times. The Great Depression was easing, but not really over yet, and life was hard. I was attending college and waiting tables, hawking papers, and doing anything else I could think of to pay my way. If I could scrape the money up every Saturday I would go to the movies, sometimes with a date, but usually solo. It might surprise you to know," Rogers said conspiratorially, "but back then girls weren't all that interested in scrawny artistically inclined beanpoles. There were three sources of news in the world then, the radio, the newspapers and the News-Reels at the movies. I didn't have a radio, I usually couldn't afford a paper, but I could usually scrape up the nickel for the movies."

"I've seen News-Reels, they don't really sound like news, all dramatic and stuff."

"Different times Harry. From the papers and from the News-Reels, I saw that there was a sickness in the world, I saw what the Japanese were doing and what the Germans were doing, and what the Italians were doing. It seemed that they were just rampaging across the world and that no one could stop them. Then there were the rumors. Horrible rumors of entire families disappearing the night, never to be seen again." The big man's face darkened. "It wasn't until later I found out that the rumors didn't begin to cover the atrocities being committed. Some of my friends and I had arguments about it. They said it was 'over there' and not our problem. But I knew that when they were finished 'over there' they would be coming here."
"So, you tried to enlist to keep it over there?"

"Yes. It was fairly obvious that we would be in that war sooner or later. There was no way we would have left the Brits on their own…"

Harry nodded. "Fight them there so you don't have to fight them here."

"That was my reasoning." Rogers admitted. "And of course they kicked me out of the recruiting office. It was only because I fit Dr. Erskine's search profile that I was ever selected for Operation: Rebirth." He grinned. "Captain America was specifically created to fight the Axis, so of course the first thing the Army did was assign me to a stateside billet."

"Thank you Steve. That helps, a lot."

"Anytime Trooper." The old soldier never thought to ask how hearing his story could have possibly helped his young friend.

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Severus Snape looked across the table toward the Charms Master.

"Remind me to apologize to Minerva. I had no idea how much parchment work my teaming with Evans and Lupin had caused her."

"What about Slughorn?" Filius asked.

"He had me do my own administrative work for the project. Perhaps I should think about doing that."

"I don't think I've seen a project team this size outside of Hufflepuff for decades. Four of your Slytherins, five of my Ravenclaws."

Severus examined the team proposal again. "I'm ashamed to admit that I have no idea what they are trying to do. When I first got this proposal from my students I thought it was a joke."

"I must admit to being more than a little confused by their proposal as well." Filius admitted. "Even the 'proof of concept' device they submitted mystified me."

Septima Vector looked up from grading her papers at the far end of the staff table. "Mr. Stark's proof of concept device demonstrates a basic mathematical function. The fact that he managed to get it to work with only minor help from Bathsheba is just short of miraculous."

"So you believe that this 'Calculator' is a viable project?" Severus asked.

"I believe that if anyone can do it, a team led by Mr. Stark would be the most likely to succeed. I sat in on his sessions with Bathsheba, and the boy is brilliant. He went from knowing nothing about runes to planning and carving that counter of his in three weeks. I also believe that if they succeed, I will be the first in line to purchase one."

"That's a ringing endorsement, coming from you Septima." Snape noted.

"I'll also tell you this: That calculator is just what they're sure they can do. Their actual goal is far more complex."

Severus wasn't sure if he was comfortable hearing that.
"But Luna is alright?"

"Yes Xeno." Filius poured another drink and set it before his former student and one time apprentice on the dueling circuit. "Poppy Pomfrey checked Luna out every way she could think of, and then she called in experts on possession and dark compulsions. Young Luna has been given a clean bill of health."

"Good, and of course Lucius is completely untouchable."

Filius sighed. "By the Ministry. He had invested far too much to fall to such slim evidence."

"Damned Ministry" Xeno Lovegood said raising the glass to his lips. "So how is Luna doing? Taking after Selene I hope."

"She is doing exceptionally well. She only slipped and called me 'Uncle Filius' once, and that was during my orientation session with her"

"Has she made any friends? She has been so isolated since…"

"Her year mates are a bit stand-offish, but she had been taken under the wing of a second year, Miss Padma Patil. She has taken to studying with a subgroup of Second years, Miss Patil, Miss Granger, Mr. Stark."

"Ah, Stark. Good family the Potters. Shame what happened to them. Stark is a good boy?"

"Yes. As soon as Luna showed him the diary, he immediately brought it and Luna to me."

Xeno nodded. "It's not easy trusting authority figures at that age. Does he know Riddle is after him?"

"I told him of his legend myself." Filius colored a bit. "He told me that the story didn't make any sense, and then asked how it came to be that everyone knows a story about a night with a single survivor with no memory of the event."

"Ah, the rare Ravenclaw that questions the source materials." Xeno downed another drink. "What are you going to do Filius?"

The Charms Master refilled both glasses and sipped at his. "What are you going to do Xeno?"

Kristine Granger sat quietly in what she had come to think of as 'her' spot inside Kings Cross Station, waiting to pick up her only daughter from the train for the Christmas holidays. Her spot was a café table strategically placed so that she could keep an eye on the hidden entrance to Platform 9 ¾, and she could keep an eye open for fellow parents. She knew from Hermione that she was far from the only 'Muggle born' at Hogwarts, but so far Kristine had yet to actually meet another parent of a first generation magic user.

Until today. Kristine had been watching the redheaded woman for more than twenty minutes. She was obviously watching the barrier, and as evidenced by the way she dressed, very obviously a Yank. Kristine smiled. From what Hermione had told her of her classmates, there was only one student likely to have an American waiting for him. This presented another chance to learn a little bit more about her daughter's friend.
Kristine rose to her feet and casually made her way to the redhead. "Waiting for Harry?"

The redhead jumped in surprise at the unexpected question. "I'm sorry, was I that obvious?" She extended her hand, "Pepper Hogan, you must be Mrs. Granger?"

"Kristine, please. Pepper? Really?"

Pepper blushed. "It's actually Virginia, but I picked up the nickname in high school and it's all anyone knows me by. So... Do you know as much about Harry as I think I know about Hermione?"

"Well, I've heard at least a dozen one sided conversations on the phone."

"Those are fun. I always try not to laugh. Harry's nursing a major crush on a girl back home and some of the contortions he puts himself through to show that he doesn't really care one way or the other are laughably funny."

"Really? So far we haven't had to deal with that, thank god." Kristine smiled. "In fact we're still getting used to Hermione having friends. She owes that to Harry I think. She never seemed to make friends before Hogwarts. Then the first letter home she was telling us all about her new friends Harry, Neville, Padma, Sue and Hannah." Kristine guided Pepper back to her table.

"Harry really enjoyed the time he spent with your family back in August."

"Glad to hear it. We enjoyed having Harry and Jennifer stay with us." The Dental Surgeon paused for a moment, "So... are you like Jennifer?"

The redhead's eyes sparkled. "No, I'm an Executive Personal Assistant, not a lawyer."

"No, I meant do you..."

"I'm messing with you. I'm not a member of the Spandex set; I'm just a glorified secretary."

Their conversation was interrupted by a small crowd of people exiting the barrier to Platform 9 ¾. Both women rose to their feet.

"Pepper!" Harry called as he rushed to her.

"Mum!" Hermione called as she rushed to her mother. Kristine wrapped her arms around her daughter, all the while watching Pepper doing the same with Harry, lifting him from the ground in her enthusiastic embrace.

A glorified secretary indeed.

-===oooOOOooo===-

Lucius Malfoy appeared at the apparition point of his club with a soft crack, handing his traveling cloak to the waiting House Elf. Draco had arrived home from school and Narcissa was making her obligatory fuss over the boy.

Narcissa's pampering of the boy infuriated Lucius to no end. He had never been a pampered prince. Abraxas Malfoy had seen to that. Lucius' father had made sure that Lucius had understood his place in the world, lessons reinforced by pain.

The only pain that Draco knew was the pain of indecision when he was forced to choose between two pleasures.
"Ah, Lord Malfoy." Amos Cottswald, the proprietor of the club, bowed deeply in greeting. "How can we serve you tonight?"

"Dinner. Some of your exquisite Prime Rib I believe. Then perhaps some entertainment."

"Of course Lord Malfoy. What might your preferences be for the evening's entertainment?"

"Young."

"Of course Lord Malfoy." The man's tastes were well known at this establishment after all. "This way please."

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Lucius slowly woke to darkness, shaking his head. His mouth was parched, his tongue swollen. What was happening? His eyes were covered somehow; he could feel the fabric covering his eyelids.

"Welcome back to the land of the living Lucius." A voice he didn't recognize said in his ear.

"No, don't try to speak; you can't, not for a while anyway." The magically distorted voice continued in a conversational manner. "A most interesting artifact found its way into the possession of a first year Hogwarts student. A diary belonging to Tom Marvolo Riddle as hard as that may be to believe."

The voice changed. Suddenly it was as if his own son Draco speaking to him. "The diary has an embedded soul fragment. Did you know that Lucius? That soul fragment attempted to possess the firstie, but she resisted until she could turn the diary over to the staff. Do you know whose magical signature was all over the diary?"

A solid… something smashed into Lucius' left hand repeatedly, fracturing all the bones in the hand and several in the wrist. The head of the house of Malfoy thrashed on the platform he lay upon silently screaming at the pain.

"It was your signature old friend." Now the voice was that of Severus Snape. "Your magical signature was all over an artifact that attempted to harm a school girl. As you might imagine, that has caused a bit of concern in certain corners." The implement of pain smashed into his right knee, crushing his knee cap and driving shards of the bone into the surrounding flesh. "Everyone knows that attempting to bring you to task for your actions toward the young girl would be pointless." Severus' voice continued.

"You would just buy your way out of facing your responsibilities." The voice changed again to one Lucius barely recognized through the pain as belonging to Argus Filch. "Or claim being under the Imperius again. But we know the truth don't we Lucius?"

Malfoy silently screamed as the bones in his right forearm were crushed. Filch's voice continued. "Now you might be asking yourself why I'm not allowing you see who I is. If you think about it, I'm sure you will recall the power of the fear of the unknown, from your time hiding your face behind that white mask, all the while under the Imperius of course. You're frightened of me now, and will be even more frightened of me in the future. I've proven I can reach out and take you at anytime, no matter where you are, from your magnificent home to your private club."

"You is mine Bad Master, any time I'se be wanting you." The voice changed to that of a… House Elf? "Youse can wear youse hidey mask. Yous can tell everybodies that Bad Dark Lord is making you slave like Elf with impery magic. Ise don't care. Ise get you anywheres. Ise punish Bad Master. Like this." A blade buried itself in his right thigh.
"I think you understand me now Lucius." The voice changed to that of Cornelius Fudge. "Let it suffice to say that if any other of Lord Thingie's old school things should find their way back to Hogwarts, I would likely become quite vexed with you."

"Whereas now, I am simply slightly annoyed." The voice continued using the tones and speech patterns of Minerva McGonagall as someone twisted the knife in his thigh. "And Merlin himself will not be able to help you should I suspect that you were to attempt to rejoin the forces of darkness… I have always wondered how long it would take for someone to die when I do this…” Something wet was suddenly on the right side of his face, burning, consuming his flesh. It was pain even beyond his memories of the Dark Lord's Cruciatas.

"I trust you understand I am not joking Lucius. Your life belongs to me." The voice changed a final time to that of Albus Dumbledore. A hand grasped Lucius' face. "No, sadly not quite so pretty any longer. The wages of sin and all that. Hopefully you've some skills in the field of glamours, else it might be advisable to stay away from children and the easily startled. Good bye Lucius."

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Narcissa Malfoy regally sat at the table and signaled the elves to begin serving.

"Will father be here for breakfast?" Draco asked hopefully.

"I do not know. I've yet to see him this morning. Now, eat up. I've made an appointment for you to pay your respects to Sirius Black this morning."

"Sirius Black? Why am I paying my respects to him?"

"Draco, you need to start paying attention to the world around you. Sirius' has been cleared of the Potter murders, which restored him to his position as the Head of the House of Black."

"I still don't understand Mother."

"Sirius has no heir. You are next in line unless he produces an heir, and his time in Azkaban had had its effect. By paying your respects, you are positioning yourself to be taken as his heir, cementing your claim."

Draco seemed to ponder her words for a moment. "I don't understand, if I am already in line, why would I need to…"

Draco's question was interrupted by Lucius Malfoy flying through the windows of the dining room, his mangled body falling, seemingly lifelessly to the floor.

Draco was shocked by his mother's screaming, and even more shocked by the ruined horror of his father's face.

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August 13, 1991

New York City

Stark Estate:

"Dad?"
Tony Stark looked up from his desk. "Harry just in time. Dumbledore should be here in a few
minutes, you can tell him to get lost and he'll be out of our lives."

Harry's mind was racing. How was he going to do this? How was he going to convince Dad to let
him go?

"Dad, if you've got the time, I'd like to talk to you about that."

An eyebrow lifted toward Stark's hairline. "What's changed? The only reason you would say that is if
you've decided you want to go."

Damn it. Trying to fool Tony Stark was such a…

"Dad, I was just thinking it might be nice to be around, you know, people like me."

"Like you?"

"Well, you know." Harry suddenly became very interested in his shoes. "I've never met another
Magic user that was a kid, you know? New Salem is full of middle aged people. No kids at all."

"You're trying to tell me you want to leave your friends to be with others 'like you'? What's going on
Harry?"

"Dad, really, I need to do this."

"You need to? Now I know something is going on." Stark fixed his son with a stare for a few
moments. "Harry I attended a boarding school at your age. I can assure you that they aren't as
much fun as they sound in books."

"Please Dad?"

The elder Stark considered the situation. Something was up. Harry had a highly developed need to
do 'the right thing'. Harry thought that there was something he needed to do at this school,
something important. Stark knew full well what Harry and Franklyn Richards had been getting up to
with the Power kids. Was this a young hero thing? Is Pulse needed in Scotland?

"Alright." Tony said. "We'll try Hogwarts for a year. BUT, you'll need to maintain your grades in
your technical classes. It will mean summer classes."

"Thank you Dad."

"For a year. If your grades slip due to this provincial school's 19th century curriculum, I'll have you
out of there so fast your head will swim."

"I promise Dad."

The Security system signaled that Albus Dumbledore was once again on the property.

"You bring him here. I'm going to want some guarantees from the old man before I sign anything."

....=ooo0000ooo====....
The whistling sound faded as the quinjet cleared the last of the atmosphere and main propulsion dropped to standby mode. The suborbital ballistic arc portion of the trip had begun.

Pepper tightened her grip on Harry's hand. "Glad to be coming home?"

"Yeah," Harry said, rubbing his thumb across the back of her hand. "It's been better this year, no major excitement at all." He grinned, "Well, other than some kind of possessed book."

"Possessed book?"

"Yeah, a diary that wanted people to write in it... It tried to get a girl interested in me for some reason." Harry shrugged. "We turned it into Professor Flitwick, who got awfully excited about it. Whatever it was, the teachers took care of it. Since then I've just worked on keeping my grades up and staying on my exercise program."

"Well, the Captain will be happy to hear that you haven't been slacking off." Pepper laughed. The idea of a possessed book was a bit disturbing, but it had evidently been taken care of. She wasn't sure she really approved of this school Harry attended. "What are your plans for the holidays?"

"Well, I've got to do a little shopping. Fortunately I've got three and a half months worth of allowance burning a hole in my pocket, so that won't be a problem."

"Planning on getting something special for your friends at school?"

"Not really. Oh, small things, but nothing special... Speaking of special, could you remind me to talk to Dad about going back a day early?"

"Sure," Pepper released his hand long enough to make a note in her PDA. "Why?"

"I need to go by the Gringotts bank. A couple of classmates suggested that I might be an heir of an estate of some sort. I keep being told my birth parents were well off."

"Do you suppose that you could deal with that at the Boston Branch?"

"I didn't know there was a Boston Branch." Harry paused to consider this new information. "That would be worth a shot, the worst that could happen is that they tell me that they can't help me and I
"You're the best Pepper." Harry said. "So," he asked conspiratorially, "Any idea what Dad might want for Christmas? Billionaires are a pain to buy for."

As per family tradition, Augusta Longbottom personally brought the family tea service to her Grandson's suite upon his return from Hogwarts as she had done this for his father and her mother for herself so long ago.

"Welcome home Neville." She said pouring his tea from him.

"Thank you Gran, it's good to be home. How have you been?"

"Oh I've been keeping busy with my Daughters of the Goblin Wars meetings and charity events. How are your classes going?"

"Other than Potions, fine. Professor Sprout really likes my work in Herbology, I guess all my time in the greenhouses is paying off."

"What is is about Potions that is giving you problems?"

"Well, I think it's mostly the professor. He's got something of an abrasive personality, and he tends to wait until I'm concentrating and asks me a question, that distracts me, and I end up making mistakes." Neville grinned. "I'm guessing you'd already guessed that from the number of caldrons I've had to replace."

"Yes…" Augusta got that vacant look she wore whenever she was remembering her son as he had been. "Your father spoke of Severus Snape on occasion, calling him petty and bitter. I suppose it isn't really surprising he hasn't changed much over the years. Perhaps we should look into getting you a potions tutor over the summer. Many careers require a firm grounding in potions to even get started; we can't have you losing out because of Albus Dumbledore's unfathomable hiring practices."

"Uh, Gran… About this summer…"

"Yes Neville? What about this summer?"

"I've been invited to stay at a friend's home for the first week in July this summer." Neville hesitated. He never liked asking his Gran for things, she tended to be overprotective. "I'd like to go, so I wanted to ask permission."

Augusta raised an eyebrow. "A week? Do I know this friend and his family?"

"You met Harry last year on the platform when I left for school. Remember? The dark haired boy with the American accent?"

"Yes, I remember meeting him. He seemed to be polite as I recall…" Augusta thought for a moment. "So this visit would be to the New World?"

"Yes. Harry lives outside New York city in the United States."

"I don't know Neville. An international Portkey would be fairly expensive…" Augusta was torn. She
liked the independence that Neville was slowly beginning to exhibit, but international travel at his age?

"Harry told me not to worry about the transportation. His father has some business in Europe in June, so Harry will be staying with him on this side of the Atlantic from when school lets out until July. The plan was for us all to ride to the States in their flying machine." Neville tried to think of what the flying machine was called... "Their airplane."

Augusta was horrified at the thought of her only grandson being flung through the air in one of those insanely dangerous wood and fabric Muggle flying machines she had seen as a child. "I don't know Neville. I would have to speak with Harry's guardian about the visit."

Neville rolled his eyes, just a bit. "Yes Gran."

"Your father and his were good friends. They were in Gryffindor together, played Quidditch together, and joined the Aurors together." August found it a bit hard to breath. She had always wanted Neville to be like Frank. Did she want him to be this much like Frank? "Had things been different, the two of you might well have been raised as brothers..."

"Gran?"

"I believe that we can work something out for your holiday with your friend Neville. I will need to contact Harry's guardian to work out the particulars, but I believe you will find the experience educational."

Tony Stark waited inside the hangar as the quinjet made its final approach. Waiting for the roar of the space plane's main propulsion system to be replaced by the hissing shriek of the hovering jets, the billionaire occupied himself by thinking through the next upgrade he had been playing with to suggest for the suborbitals in his fleet. Just a few tweaks might shave as much as four minutes off a transatlantic flight. The idea was almost ready for testing. He would have to send a copy to T'challa and his Wakanda Design Group, so that the Design engineers for the Quinjet project could check out the upgrade for viability.

He watched the space plane canceled its forward momentum to fully engage hover mode, and then slowly settle onto its landing gear before power was cut. Good pilot, he noted. Whenever Tony himself landed one of the quinjets, there was a decided bump involved. Probably one of the jocks that Rhodey trained. That meant he was one of the young ones.

Wonderful. 40 was rushing at Stark with the speed of an oncoming train, and the man who wore the armor wasn't looking forward to it in the slightest. It was hard enough running his business interests while doing the Hero thing without having to get old as well.

The door to the suborbital aircraft opened and the access ramp extended to the ground. Tony's depression vanished when he saw his son appear in the doorway. From his place in the hanger, he raised his right hand in greeting and started toward the giant aircraft at a trot.

"Harry!"

"Dad!"

"What's this?"
Harry had been home for three days, and had finally cracked the books for his project. He looked up from the book he was taking notes from and discovered his father had picked up one of his drawings and was examining it. "That's a rough draft of a block diagram for a school project."

"This looks like you're going to be trying to build a computer from scratch?" Tony asked. "Fun."

"I'm working on the processor section, but yeah, that's the project. We promised a calculator, but we're trying to build a computer."

The elder Stark sat down across from Harry. "That's always a good plan, promise low, deliver as high as you can." He returned his attention to the drawings. "Interesting. Not electrical I take it?"

"No, we're trying to use the ambient magic in magical structures."

"Hmm." Tony picked up a pen from the table and started making a few notes of his own. "How big is your team?"

"Nine of us." Harry said absently as he made a few more notes on processor design. "I think that's about the minimum number we're going to need to be successful, but we've got some forceful personalities involved… That might make it interesting."

"Smart creative people almost always have forceful personalities, it's pretty much part of the package." Tony said, crossing a few line out on the diagram.

"Dad." Harry said, having noticed what his father was up to.

"You know, if we did a little work over the next few days, you would be well on your way to…"

"Dad."

"And this summer, we can hit the fabbers down in the lab," He paused to examine the sample rune set for an 'and' function for a second, "These symbols conduct your magic somehow I take it? I think we could get these symbols etched fairly easily…"

"Dad."

"What size casing for the final processor do you think?"

"DAD!"

Tony looked up surprised at Harry's shout. "What?"

"This is a school project Dad. A School Project. I'm not using your fabrication facilities. We're going to earn our grades and learn something. I can't let you take over."

"I don't take over your projects." Tony said with a pout.

"Cub Scouts."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," The billionaire said defensively.

"The Pinewood Derby?"

"So I helped a little."

Harry presented his father with a long suffering look. "Oh, yes. The car you 'helped' with broke the
freaking sound barrier and buried itself three inches into a concrete wall."

Tony grinned. "It looked really cool doing it though. And I still say it was regulation, there were no moving parts beyond the wheels."

"For a Cub Scout Pinewood derby you broke several laws of physics when you gave a wooden car a 'frictionless surface' and managed to isolate it from planetary motion. It broke the sound barrier Dad. The sonic boom blew out every window in the gym, and broke quite a few across the street."

"It beat Reed's car."

"You do realize that the competition between you two isn't the healthiest thing in the world don't you? Once he saw that you had developed a linear accelerator that used the axles of the car to accelerate the car along its own axis, then he figured out a way for his wooden car to project a pinhole singularity in front of itself, so that it was in an ever accelerating free fall. Reed destroyed the track with that stupid thing."

"Destroyed the track AND lost to my car." Tony pointed out with a grin. 

"Franklin and I couldn't show our faces at the meetings for months after that without someone bugging us about 'the car incident'"

"We fixed everything. That pack is the only one in the world with an indestructible six lane Pinewood derby track complete with a finish line timer accurate to a picosecond… And a nice video score board for showing instant replays of the finishes."

"They're also the only pack in the world with restrictions against mad scientist fathers helping with projects. Don't forget the Raingutter Regatta. Balsa wood boats aren't supposed to throw up a rooster tail, or attack the boat in the next lane. That's what got us thrown out of Cub Scouts."

"I still say Reed was cheating."

Harry just looked to the ceiling. "I suppose I should just be thankful that Dr. Doom didn't have a kid in the school district. God knows what might have happened then."

"My car would have kicked his gun metal grey butt too."

"Dad!"

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"What are you working on Daughter?"

Padma looked up to find her father Chandrahahas, looking over the books she was using for research.

"Pad's just doing her Geek thing Papa," Parvati snarked from her place on the sofa on the other side of the room. The Gryffindor half of the twins turned her attention back to the Patil/Stark texting device she was using to converse with her best friend and dorm mate Lavender Brown.

"I'm working on some ideas for out OWL project Papa." Padma said, ignoring her sister.

"Should I assume that since you are researching these Muggle books, you are teamed with either Hermione, Harry, or both?"

"With both Papa," Padma grinned at her father, "and with six others from Ravenclaw and Slytherin houses. It was Harry's idea to try and replicate Muggle electronics using magic to let us try and build
a computer capable of working in high magic areas."

"Hmm. As an upstanding member of the Pureblood community, I suppose I should be opposed to this." Chandrahas said sternly. When Padma looked up with concern, a grin formed on his face. "Of course, given the amount of money I'm making in my partnership with Stark's Magical Consumer Electronics division, that would be a bit hypocritical wouldn't it? So, what are you intending to build?"

"We're hoping for a computer Papa." She gestured at the notes she had made. "Harry has come up with ways to emulate some of the more basic 'logic circuits' using magical constructs, mostly runes. He has asked me to look into better ways of doing so over the holiday."

"It is good to see you taking your project so seriously Padma." Chandrahas looked to Parvati still lying on the sofa. "And what of you Daughter? How is your project progressing?"

"Oh Papa, that's not due until the end of Fifth year. Lavender and I submitted out outline for the project. We're working on improving some of the more advanced cosmetic charms, but there's plenty of time to worry about that, no sense in ruining a holiday."

Chandrahas and Padma exchanged a look. Padma shrugged. She had no idea why Parvati had so much trouble motivating herself toward her school work.

"I will see progress on your project by the end of the year Parvati, or I will have to see what I can do to motivate you. Perhaps a summer working in the office with your mother would allow you to find the focus you need."

Parvati sat up on the sofa, her texting conversation with Lavender forgotten. "Papa!"

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"What are you looking at?"

Harry looked up from the jewelry display. "Just looking for a gift."

"For who?" Franklin Richards asked.

"Friends." Harry pointed out a necklace. "Do you think Julie would like that one?"

"Julie?" Franklin put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry, Julie's got a boyfriend."

"A boyfriend? Since when?"

"Harry, she's just turned fifteen, she doesn't tell you stuff like that in her letters." How was he going to break this to his best friend? "Harry, she always thought that you hung around them so much because you were Jack's friend."

"Crap." Harry breathed, before looking up to their adult escort.

Happy Hogan smiled at Harry before returning his attention to the crowd in the vicinity. Happy took his responsibilities very seriously. "Don't look at me Kiddo. I don't unnerstand women, never have, not even when me an' Pep was married."

"But…"

"Come on Harry, she's fifteen and you're twelve. Did you really think you had a chance with Julie Power?" Franklin said seriously, before bumping shoulders with his friend. "Now, Katie on the other
Harry slugged Franklin in the shoulder.

"Harry," the former boxer said quietly interrupting the fight before it could really get started. "Sometimes the smart thing t' do is wait. The two and a half years between you look like forever to her now. When you're twenty five and she's twenty eight, she won't care in the slightest. Now, how about some lunch? You two are buying."

"Which way do these screw things go?" Tracey Davis asked from across the Granger kitchen table.

"Uh," Hermione paged through her manual, then looked up panicked. "It doesn't say."

"What are you two doing, and why are you doing it to my computer?" Stuart Granger asked from the doorway.

"It's research Daddy." Hermione explained. "Our OWL Project is an attempt to make a magical computer. We wanted to see what a electronic computer looked like so that we would know what we are trying to emulate."

"And the manual doesn't tell us how to get the screw things out." Tracey complained.

Stuart looked between the two girls trying to decide if they were serious. They were. "Ok, to begin with, those are Philips screws and you're using a slotted screwdriver. Here," he took the tool from the young girl's hand and handed her the proper driver. "See how the tip comes to a point, it fits into the X shape on the screw. As to what direction, there's a rhyme to help you remember which way to turn most screws. 'Lefty loosey, rightie tightie.' You want to loosen the screws, so you turn them to the left... but I don't think you're going to learn much just by looking at the insides."

"It's filthy in here" Tracey said as she pulled the access panel off the box. Hermione craned her neck to look and indeed the metal box seemed to be full of dust bunnies and dead insects.

"Honestly Daddy, don't you keep your equipment clean? This is hardly hygienic."

"Alright, alright. I'll get it cleaned up for you." Stuart Granger hefted the open computer case and carried it out to his garage where he powered up his air compressor while wondering just when it was that his life had reached the point that he had two women yelling at him to clean up around the house. Shaking his head at his lot in life, the dentist searched though the drawers on his work bench until he found the appropriate nozzle (he principally used the air compressor to keep the tyres of his car properly inflated.) which he attached to the hose, and then carefully blew the dust from the interior of his computer.

"Here you go." He said as he carried the PC back inside. "All clean." Still a bit concerned about his delicate machine, Stuart settled into a chair to observe.

"Well," Tracey said hesitantly, "it looks different than the pictures. It's got all these strings and ribbon things in it."

Stuart looked to see what she was talking about. "Those are cables. They either move information between pieces in the computer or electricity from the power supply to power all the parts." He examined the reactions of the two young women, Hermione seemed to be getting upset that the photos in her book didn't exactly replicate what she was seeing in the case, and Tracey seemed to be hesitant about actually touching anything at all. "How about I explain what I know about the
"Ok." Tracey Davis said in a manner that suggested that she didn't think anyone really understood these masses of metal and plastic.

"This is the power supply. It takes the 240 volts alternating current from the mains and changes it to several voltages of direct current."

"That's electricity, right?" Tracey asked doubtfully.

"Right. The electricity flows through these cables to power the system. This is the main board…" Stuart spent the next twenty minutes explaining to his daughter and her classmate the various parts of his computer and their function. He then left them to their studies.

He found Kris in the sitting room reading.

"How goes the war, oh purveyor of obscure electronic knowledge?" she asked with a grin.

"I don't know. They didn't know how to use a screw driver until I told them how. Hermione was near panic because it wasn't outlined in her book, and I think Tracey is frightened by every single thing in this house." He shook his head. "They may have bitten off more than they can chew."

"Why? I mean sure, it won't be all that easy, but, I mean you built the one they're looking at."

Stuart shook his head. "I built it from standard easily obtained parts. It would be more honest to say that I assembled it. What they're proposing to do is start with the raw materials and build a machine from scratch. I know I couldn't do that with one of our computers… But, they do have Harry on their side, and Tony could probably build a computer just using a pile of sand and an old pair of shoes I suspect. I just hope Hermione doesn't end up too disappointed."

"Be seated girl," The old man said imperiously.

She nervously sat where her mother indicated. This would be her first meal in the dining room with the adults. Prior to this the only place she had eaten when at home was in the nursery under the watchful eye of her nanny. She knew that there were reasons for her being here tonight. Someone wanted her to do something, and this was part of the payment for her services. She wasn't supposed to associate with the adults until she was fifteen if then, still three years in the future.

The Soup course was served. She concentrated on eating properly. No noises, no spills, nothing to call attention to herself. Of course, none of that worked when one was specifically invited to dinner to be the center of attention.

"Tell us about the Potter heir."

She carefully placed her spoon on the table so that she wasn't tempted to gesture with it. The folded her hands in her lap, "He was sorted into Ravenclaw, and he is doing well in all of his courses. His class standing is fifth overall, even with his withdrawal from class participation for the last three months of last year." She said searching her memories for things to say about Harry Stark. "He is has friends in and is friendly with all of the houses. His principle male friend is Neville Longbottom."

"The Potters and the Longbottoms have a long history together. If there has ever been a major disagreement between those two families, it was long ago." Her Aunt Eunice noted as the next course was served.
"I'm not sure Harry Stark knows of his family's history or alliances. His closest friends appear to be Padma Patil and Hermione Granger." She continued.

"A foreigner and a Mudblood." Uncle Wesley added.

"Yes. They are first and second in our class respectively. He is also close to two female Hufflepuffs, Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott. A pureblood and a Half blood. I believe that Stark met Longbottom and the four girls on the Express."

"And his other friends?" her Grandfather asked.

"I've seen him being cordial with all five of the Weasleys from Gryffindor, and he is on good enough terms with Draco Malfoy that the two of them engage in public debates on the importance of Blood Status."

"And the results of these debates?" Grandmother asked.

"None, really. Draco makes points supporting the pure blood advantages and agenda based on tradition and emotion. Stark makes his in support of equality and merit by pointing out achievement and logic. Neither is going to convince the other of the correctness of their position, and I don't think either of them really care all that much. They appear to enjoy the exchanges. Stark is on friendly terms with many other people, but not in any significant way."

Grandmother nodded. "What of this 'study group' that the boy started last year?"

"It is held in the Great Hall pretty much every night. It started with Stark and his core group of friends and in a few weeks expanded to almost out entire year. Then second and third years joined in, now on any given night you're likely to find someone from every year. The House Elves have taken to serving drinks and light snacks to those studying."

"Tell us about his abilities." Uncle Wesley demanded.

"In class he is above average, especially in practical application. There are rumors that he was tutored by Agatha Harkness prior to his admittance to Hogwarts. I've heard that she referred to him as her 'favorite student in a century' but I cannot confirm that. He is capable of wandless magic with either hand." She paused, wondering if she should include rumor in her report. "Last year a troll somehow made its way into the castle. No one ever explained exactly what happened that night. What I can report at fact is that a huge section of the wall on the fourth floor under the Astronomy Tower was blown outward, while half and only half of a troll was seen being removed from the castle and Harry Stark ended up in the Hospital wing." She paused to allow everyone to draw their own conclusions from this information. "The next day Stark's Muggle father along with several other people, including Agatha Harkness, were all in the Great Hall at Breakfast time."

Aunt Eunice nodded. "And we are all aware of the boy's demonstrated relationship with the Old Norse powers from the appearance of the Odinson at the Wizengamot last May. Further, just the mention of the boy's adopted father's name frightened Amelia Bones to her very core."

The old man at the head of the table nodded slowly as he took in the information offered. "And you have joined his group for his OWL project to make a thinking machine?"

"Yes Grandfather," she said not really wanting to correct the old man that a computer didn't actually 'think'.

"Excellent. Good initiative on your part, you surprised me given your heritage." The old man gave her mother a look of loathing, she noticed that mother averted her eyes from the gaze of the patriarch.
"Alright then, you will carry on with the project and obtain his interest. Come your fifth year we will open negotiations to join the Potter fortune to our own."

"Excuse me Grandfather? I don't understand…"

"Your mother understands how to gain the interest of a young man." The old man said coolly. "She will explain the techniques to you."

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"Family time is so important." Daphne Greengrass said looking across the nursery table at her cousins, her voices dripping with sarcasm.

"We love you too Daphne." Millicent Bulstrode laughed saluting her with her wine glass.

It's not like the clan gets together all that often cousin." He sipped from the single glass of wine that the adults allowed the preteens. "What's the status on your project?"

"I'm still not convinced that we will manage to succeed," Daphne posited, "and I for one am not anxious to test the theory that a failing project can still get awarded a good grade if the methodology is sound."

"I think I am," Millicent disagreed. "Convinced I mean, Stark has quite a mind, and he has working examples of Muggle toys at his disposal."

Daphne shrugged. "We'll see. Anyway we've broken into teams, each ultimately responsible for a different part of the whole. Once we get the individual logic units figured out and finalized, we start in on our individual responsibilities. Millie and I are supposed to work on displaying the output of the machine. Obviously we will be basing this on the one used by the Ravenclaw Library reader."

"Obviously. It was suggested that we also find a way to produce a printed version of the display. I've a few ideas in that direction." Millicent agreed. "Granger and Davis are tasked with dealing with what Stark called 'memory' a sort of short term storage of information, while Zabini, Entwhistle and Su Li are supposed to develop a longer term method of information storage.

"Hmm, I wonder, is her give name Su or Li?"

"I don't know." Millicent admitted. "I've only heard anyone use both when speaking to her."

"I think her given name is Li," Daphne offered. "I recall reading something about naming conventions of the Orient and…"

"It doesn't matter." He said waving his hand dismissively. "You haven't said what Stark is doing."

"He and the Smart Patil are working on something called 'the Processor'. He describes it as the 'brain' of the system, the place where all the 'Data Manipulation', whatever that is, takes place." Daphne shrugged. "From what I've read and what Stark has told us, this will be the most complex portion of the project. After we start in on our individual teams, as each finishes, we will all join in on the Processor unit."

"Interesting" he said.

"Not yet, but it might be." Millicent said. "So, we've told you our news, your turn. What's going on with the Malfoys?"
"Yes. They've canceled all their normal public appearances." Daphne added. "Lucius and Narcissa even missed the Ministry's Yule Ball, that's a first."

"I wish I knew," he said with a shrug. "They've been locked in that estate of theirs since the day after Draco got back from school… I'm as in the dark as everyone else."

"True," Daphne giggled. "But then everyone expects that of you."

He didn't even bother to try to look offended, smiling gently as he nodded. "Indeed."

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"To missing friends" Remus raised his glass.

"And a promise to those friends that we will kill a few people who so richly deserve it." Sirius agreed.

"Happy Christmas Sirius." Remus said as he drained his glass.

"And to you Moony." Sirius agreed. His eyes fell upon the still wrapped gift at the end of the table. "Do you think he'll like it?"

"I hope so. What boy wouldn't like an invisibility cloak, though getting it away from Dumbledore was like pulling teeth." Lupin smiled. "Hopefully he'll appreciate the photo album as well, as a way to connect to his heritage if nothing else."

There was a lull in the conversation, the only sounds being that of Kreacher cleaning up after the holiday meal.

"I was thinking…" Sirius began.

"Merlin protect us, almost nothing good ever comes from you starting a sentence with those words Padfoot."

"Oh, very funny Moony. One could almost forget that you were the brains of the Marauders and not the wit." Sirius snarked, side arming a pillow at his friend. "As I was saying, I was thinking that once the new school term begins, I might head over to the States and see if I could get to know this Tony Stark bloke."

Remus blinked. "Why?"

"Well, he's done a smashing job raising our boy, and I've been thinking that the reason we've had such trouble connecting to Harry is that we've been trying to connect to him through James." Sirius hesitated for a moment. "Harry isn't James, and never will be. The mistake we've been making is not recognizing that. I think the reason that he seems to lose interest whenever we bring up James and Lily is that at some level he believes learning more about them would be a betrayal of his dad."

"James is his dad." Remus growled.

"No, James was his father. Tony Stark is his dad. Believe me Moony, I know." Sirius refilled both his and Remus' glass from the bottle on the table between them. "Orion was my father, but I never had a dad until Charlus accepted me as James' brother."

"But James…"

"James would have been a hell of a dad, given the chance," Sirius interrupted. "But he and Harry
never had that chance. Stark stepped up, and has done a fantastic job raising our boy when we couldn't do it. Harry's smart, strong and happy, what more could we ask for or expect?"

"A little knowledge of his family's history would be nice." Remus groused. What was going on here? He was supposed to be the level headed contemplative one, not Sirius.

Sirius smiled. "And where would a Muggle like Stark have learned of the Potter family history?"

"Damn it Padfoot! Since when are you the calm sensible one?"

"What can I say Moony? Like a fine wine, I've matured with age." A smile crossed the lips of the dog animagus. "And another aspect I share with a fine wine; I enjoy being drunk."

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"Lucius, come to dinner."

The man didn't speak, or give any indication that he had heard her. He just continued to stare out the window as the snow continued to fall around the manor.

"Lucius, please. Draco needs his father," Narcissa tried pleading, knowing it wasn't going to work. "He needs your example."

"Then Draco needs to find his example somewhere else." The man's voice rasped out, as if rusty from lack of use. "Perhaps your cousin."

"Lucius please. He is your son. He needs you."

No response once again. Narcissa stood watching the broken man, watched as his long fingers caressed the flawless bone white surface of his 'new face'. She found herself wondering what her husband could have done to provoke whoever had maimed him so, to hate him so much.

The broken bones and cuts had been healed within days of their infliction, but what ever they had done to her husband's face... The Healers couldn't identify what had caused the damage; much less counter its effects.

Now Lucius wore a half mask, one that covered the damaged right side of his face from temple to chin. Yet even with that, all the man had done for the last week was stare out the window and caress the smooth surface of the mask.

Shaking her head Narcissa exited Lucius' bedchamber, and returned to the manor's formal dining room where Draco sat waiting.

"Is father coming?" the boy asked.

"I do not believe he is Draco. Your Father is having difficulty dealing with what has happened."

"Why? Why would anyone do that to a great man like Father?"

Narcissa hesitated. "When a man is as successful as your father has been, enemies are gained. While your father hasn't shared with me what actually happened, I suspect that he was attacked by one of those enemies."

"Then father must identify who ever it was and they must be sent to Azkaban!" Draco proclaimed.

"I quite agree Draco. Your father however refuses to speak of what happened." She watched as the
boy's face clouded. "My son, your father is a great man. Never doubt that. He took a family estate that was well past its prime and turned it into what is all about us. He has provided for us in ways that most of our peers can only dream of. Lucius will work through this and do what he needs to do to get justice for himself. I trust your father, and you must as well. You cannot speak of this until Lucius decides to speak of it himself."

Narcissa watched as Draco steeled his features, and nodded. Sighing quietly, Narcissa rang the bell to signal the Elves to begin the dinner service. She found herself quietly hoping that Lucius was deserving of such a dutiful son.

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"There you are." Tony said as he pulled himself into the tree fort. As soon as he was inside the tree house he found himself to be very warm. The billionaire began removing his jacket and scarf. "Why is it so hot in here?"


"Ah, something that makes no sense and I will never understand, got'cha." The man leaned back against the wall. "So, what's the problem?"

"Just feeling sorry for myself. Nothing important."

Tony stared at his son, not saying a word, just waiting for Harry to break. He always broke.

"Will you stop staring at me?" Harry whined pitifully.

Tony's response was several seconds of silence and eye contact.

"Come on Dad."

It took almost twenty seconds. "Ok. Ok. I got dumped. I just need some time to feel sorry for myself."

"You got dumped? I didn't know you were dating." Tony said.

"Well, we weren't exactly dating, but we had an understanding."

"An understanding?" Tony asked incredulously. Since when did twelve year olds have understandings? "Who is this girl?"

"Julie Power."

"Lightspeed?"

Silence filled the magically warmed tree house for a moment, finally interrupted by "Uh, who?"

"Who indeed. Did you really think I didn't know what you, Franklin and the Power kids were up to?" Tony asked with his own small smile.

"Uh… Yeah. Kinda."

"Well I did. And so does Reed. So, tell me about Julie Power dumping you."

"Well… You know how it is."
"Actually, no, I don't." His smile got wider. "I'm Tony Stark, I've never been dumped."

"Oh, great." Harry said hanging his head.

"It's the cross I have to bear. So tell me what happened."

"Julie, well, you know, she kissed me at my birthday last year."

"I seem to recall you painting the entry hall, yeah."

"That's when I knew that we had an understanding."

Once again silence filled the tree house. Tony desperately fought off the laughter that threatened to erupt from his chest. "Harry…"

A miserable boy looked up to his father.

"Harry, you weren't dumped."

"But…"

"Harry…" Tony tried to think of the gentlest way of telling his son the truth. "Julie didn't dump you, because as far as she was concerned, you were never together outside of being the friend of her little brother and sometime teammates."

"But she kissed me," Harry protested.

"She was thirteen. Thirteen year old girls kiss people. It didn't mean anything beyond that she was slightly fond of you. Now she's what? Almost fifteen?"

"Turned fifteen on the fifth." Harry said morosely.

"She's fifteen, and you're twelve. She is looking to experiment with a more adult relationship. She couldn't get that from you. Hell son, she never even considered you for a real relationship."

"But…"

"Harry, would you consider dating a nine year old?"

"Ugh, No." Harry proclaimed.

"And how is Julie dating you any different?"

"But... she kissed me."

"As a friend. Nothing more."

Harry considered what he had been told, and was beginning to see the logic behind it. He didn't like it, but… "Should I try to talk to her?"

Tony shook his head. "Only if you want to embarrass her and yourself. She would likely be mortified that you believed that she was leading you on." The man reached over and ruffled the untamable hair on his son's head. "I know it's trite, but you'll look back on this and smile a bit. And who knows, in ten years, when the three years between you don't matter quite so much, you and Julie might make a real try of it."
"Do you really think so Dad?"

"No, not really. You'll likely always feel a bit weird around her, but you'll never forget her. No one
forgets the first person they were desperately in like with. Now come on. Jarvis has pulled out all the
stops for Christmas dinner tonight."

"Good afternoon, how may Gringotts help you today?" the Goblin asked with his long fingered hands folded on his desktop.

"We've come to investigate rumors we've heard that my Son has a family vault in your London branch." Tony said. "We weren't sure if you could access the records of another branch, but thought
that it wouldn't hurt to ask."

"We can," the Goblin who had identified himself as 'Scarmonger' admitted. "However I can assure
you that other than the vault you hold in partnership with Chandrahas Patil, we have no vaults under
the name of Stark at any of our branches."

"Stark is my adopted name," Harry said speaking for the first time. "My birth name was Potter."

Scarmonger blinked. Twice. "Potter?" he choked out.

"Yes."

The Goblin seemed to hesitate, and then pushed forward a shallow bronze bowl and a knife with a curious blue metallic blade. "If I could get a blood sample to use in the verifying of your claim?"

Father and son exchanged a look, and then Harry picked up the blade.

"A shallow cut across the palm should do it," Scarmonger said. "The blade is charmed to heal the cut
after a short time, allowing the sample to be taken."

Harry paused, and then with a determined expression drew the blade across the palm of his left hand. He was so shocked by the lack of pain he almost dropped the knife. Gathering his wits he allowed
the blood to pool in his palm before tipping his hand over to allow the blood to drip into the bronze bowl.

"Thank you," the Goblin said, rising from his chair. "One moment please while we analyze your
sample."

Tony waited until Scarmonger had left the room before speaking. "Blood as ID? Well, I guess you
can't ever claim to have lost your wallet this way."

"You know, it's really odd the way that the magical world is more advanced than our 'normal'" Harry
made air quotes, "society, but in other ways is positively medieval."

Tony shrugged. "Asgard is like that too. I guess if you factor in the life spans involved, it isn't really
all that surprising. He seemed a bit shocked that you were Harry Potter."

"I believe shocked is a bit of an understatement Mr. Stark." A new voice said.

Father and son watched carefully as Scarmonger deferentially escorted a goblin who appeared to be
much older to the desk in the room.

"I am Oddbit of major accounts, London Branch. Yes Mr. Stark, we have been looking for your son
for most of a decade. It was more than a little embarrassing when we realized that we had lost track of the Potter heir." The older Goblin adjusted the pince-nez spectacles perched upon his pointed nose. "We have much to talk about."

"You said you were from 'Major Accounts'?" Harry asked. "Does that mean that my birth family was…"

"I believe the polite term is 'financially comfortable'.

"How comfortable?" Tony asked.

"Once I was made aware that the Potter heir had presented himself in our Boston branch, I had the Potter records gathered for me. While I was waiting I did a bit of research on you Mr. Stark. My compliments on your business acumen, from what I could see of your portfolio, I would venture to say that you are almost Goblin in your pursuit of an honest profit." The being removed his spectacles and set about cleaning them with a handkerchief. "In answer to your question, the Potter estate comes to a current market value approximating one tenth of your own rather impressive public holdings."

"And who controls the estate?" Harry asked. "I've noticed that my birth name and image are in fairly wide spread use."

"The Potter estate is currently without a head. We at major accounts have been working under the last direction given to us by James Potter, which was 'make it grow'. While following this instruction the estate managers of which I am one have been quite active in investing in profitable ventures on both sides of the magical divide. For example the estate holds a very minor position in your father's Stark International." Oddbit replaced his spectacles upon his nose. "As far as use of your name and image go, once you had vanished we discovered that people were interested in using your name, so we authorized the use of your name and image like we would any other valuable asset of the estate."

"So those 'Little Harry' dolls?"

"Are authorized by the trust and manufactured in a facility in which you hold a thirty percent stake. On top of your share of the profits from that very profitable enterprise, your personal vault is credited on sickle and three knuts for every doll sold."

Harry considered that for a moment. "Well, that's a little better I guess. Still creepy, but better."

"Now that Harry has been found, what happens with the estate?" Tony asked.

"As it stands, young Mr. Stark has access to his Trust vault. This vault is intended to pay his living and educational expenses and is credited with ten thousand galleons per year every year since he was born. Since this vault has never been accessed, it has a current standing balance of…” Oddbit checked the file in front of him. "Two hundred seventeen thousand, nine hundred fifty three galleons, nine sickles and eleven knuts. In as much as the assets of the trust vault have never been invested, the amount in excess over and above the one hundred twenty thousand one would expect to find in the vault is explained by the fees for the use of Mr. Stark's name and image over the last decade."

"Wow." Harry said in a dazed manner.

"Indeed," Oddbit agreed. "The contents of the Potter family vault and the personal vault of James Potter will become available to Mr. Stark upon reaching his majority, which is to say, seventeen years of age. Control of the Potter estate and all of the associated investments will pass to Mr. Stark
when he reaches the age of twenty five."

Harry glanced at his father, who nodded. "Mr. Oddbit, one of my classmates suggested that it was possible that there might be prearranged marriage contracts associated with the Potter estate. Do such things exist, or is that something I don't have access to until I'm older?"

The old Goblin smiled a truly horrific sight. "I'm sorry Mr. Stark, but there will be no easy way to a mate for you. The Potter family hasn't contracted for marriage since before I came onto your account, more than one hundred and fifty years ago. You're going to have to stalk and capture your mate just like everyone else."

Harry found himself wondering if he really wanted to know that much about Goblin culture.

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Harry Potter and the Invincible TechnoMage Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

A/N: I do not own Harry Potter. Nor any of the Marvel Comics Characters mentioned herein. But you knew that.

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Harry Potter and The Invincible TechnoMage

Chapter Fifteen - Year Two Winter Term

"So," her mother asked. "That's him?"

She nodded as she watched the boy wave to his friends who rushed forward shouting greetings. It must be nice, she reflected, to have friends. "Yes."

"The Potters are reputed to be a good family..." the woman said hesitantly. "It's said that they treat their women well."

"He's only a Potter through blood," the girl said trying to keep her anger under control. "He knows next to nothing about his family. He was raised Muggle, and that's how he thinks. He's not going to want any part of this."

The older woman raised an eyebrow. "You're unhappy then?"

The girl whirled on her mother, her voice becoming uncharacteristically loud, "Of course I'm unhappy. I'm not a brood mare to be auctioned off to the highest bidder, nor am I a bargaining chip to be used to secure advantage for the family."

With a trembling hand the older woman brush an errant hair from the girl's eyes. "I was so afraid that they had broken your spirit love." She gestured to one of the benches along the wall. "We've got a few minutes before the train leaves. I think we should sit and have a talk," she glanced about, "just you and I, without the input from the family."

After the pair was seated the woman continued. "No matter what you've heard from Eunice, Wesley or your Grandfather, I didn't trap your father."

The girl seemed to be focused on the pavement between her shoes. "I never really thought you had Mum."

"We met on the Express on our way to Hogwarts first year. Illtud spotted me as a Muggle born and was interested in learning about the larger world." She smiled sadly, "That was the Ravenclaw in him. Your father was always interested in learning new things. Rather like you, little genius."

"I'm sixth overall in my year Mum, that's hardly genius."

"You've been listening to the family too much my darling; you most certainly are a genius. It's your
cautious nature that is keeping you from standing out. I suspect that you sabotage yourself to prevent yourself from gaining too high a profile among your classmates, don't you?"

The girl's blush was the answer.

"Illtud and I married a week after we left Hogwarts, then we spent a year traveling the world. We only returned to England when I discovered that I was pregnant with you. The family accepted me because your father insisted that they do so, and after all, I carried the heir of the heir. Then the day before you were born Illtud was in the wrong place at the wrong time and ended up a victim of a raid by the Death Eaters."

Tears filled the woman's eyes and her voice became choked. "Your father hung on until after you were born. Illtud loved you so much that he refused to let go of his life until after he could see you. He was holding you when he finally left us both."

"Now the family tolerates me because I am the mother of the heir. You, my darling daughter, are the heir, and there won't be another. Eunice is incapable of bearing children and Wesley is quite bent as you well know. Your grandfather isn't long for this world, which means that the others dare not anger you. You will head the family, no matter what plans your grandfather may make."

Once again the woman brushed that stubborn lock of hair from her daughter's eyes. "You are going to be working with the Potter boy on your OWL project."

"Stark," the girl corrected.

"Fine," a faint smile crossed the mother's lips. "As far as your grandfather knows, you are employing the feminine wiles I am teaching you to entrap the boy. In only five more years you, my darling daughter, will be of age, and you can tell the family to go to hell if you choose to. In the mean time, take the opportunity to get to know him. Perhaps you will find him to be interesting; perhaps you will find what I found with your father with the Stark boy or with another boy in your classes. Perhaps not. The important thing is that you think about yourself and not the family. It will not be long before they are answering to you."

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"Stark?"

Harry turned to find a worried looking Vincent Crabbe standing behind him. It was three hours into the train ride and Harry had excused himself from the reunion with his friends to use the facilities.

"Hey Vinnie, what's wrong?"

"It's Draco. He won't talk to Greg or me; he's just sittin' in his compartment staring out the window. I don't know what's going on, but I've never seen him like this…" The large boy hesitated for a minute. "You and Draco, you talk a lot, you know? I wuz hopin' that you might be able to find out whut wuz botherin' him."

Harry fought against the laughter that threatened to erupt when he realized that one of the boys widely believed to be a thug in Draco's employs appeared to genuinely care for his leader. "No Problem Vinnie, I'll see if I can get him to talk. Lay on MacDuff!"

Crabbe's brow furrowed. "No, I'm Crabbe. MacDuff is a third year in Hufflepuff."

"It's a Mun… A Muggle thing Vinnie, I was just trying to be funny." Harry slapped the larger boy on the back. "Show me where Draco's hiding."
When the door to the compartment slid open, Draco never even looked to see who it might be.

"I said I wanted be to be left alone."

"Since when have I ever cared all that much about what you want Draco?"

More than a little surprised that anyone would say that to him, Draco Malfoy turned to face the newcomer. "Stark. Look, I'm not in the mood."

"That's ok," Harry said sliding onto the bench across from the blond Slytherin. "I don't care about your moods all that much either."

Draco turned to glare at Crabbe and Goyle waiting outside the compartment.

"Hey, don't be that way Draco. Those two are worried about you. You wouldn't talk to them, wouldn't talk to anyone at all, so Vinnie found me. He figured that even if you only got pissed and yelled at me, at least you'd be communicating."

"Why would I get drunk?" Draco asked with a confused expression on his face. "You brought me something to drink?"

The Slytherin's questions caused Harry to take on his own look of confusion before the light dawned. "Sorry, different slang. In the States, to be pissed is to be angry."

"That's stupid."

"No," Harry shook his head, "that's different. So, what's going on? Girl problems?"

"What?" Draco seemed to be shocked at the question.

Harry shrugged, "It happens. I spent a good portion of Christmas vacation moping about and feeling sorry for myself because it turned out that a girl I like thought that I was around so much because I'm her younger brother's friend."

"I don't care about some stupid girl Stark," Draco said. "I am betrothed to Pansy Parkinson and have been since we were seven years old."


"Yes really." Malfoy sat a bit straighter in his seat. "If you paid any attention to my points during our debates you would know that almost all the great families set up beneficial marriages for their children. Pansy is going to be my wife, and behaves appropriately. My will is hers."

One thought ran through Harry's mind at that moment, that thought being 'Yikes!' Would he ever truly understand this culture? "Ok, if it's not a girl, and it couldn't be school work, not with your grades, what's the problem? People are worried about you Draco."

At first it appeared that Malfoy was going to stop speaking again. The boy's cool grey eyes held Harry's emerald ones for a moment, and then Draco lost his regal posture. His shoulders slumped and a worried look took control of his face.

"It's my father." He said quietly.

"What's wrong?"
"Father was assaulted, badly injured and horribly scarred. Someone hated him enough to do horrible things to him."

Harry hadn't been expecting that. "Is he ok?"

"Father is healed," Draco continued as if he hadn't heard Harry's question, "but he isn't the same. He won't speak to me, he won't leave his suite. He never even comes to meals anymore."

"Did the Aurors find who did it?"

Draco looked up and locked eyes with the Ravenclaw. "Father refused to report the attack to the Aurors. He barely allowed Mother to call for a healer. Father has always been so strong, so in charge of everything in our lives. Seeing him like this… seeing him… broken. I'm worried about him. I've never worried about him, not once. What if he…"

"Draco…" Harry interrupted, bringing Malfoy's attention back to the here and now, "I only know your dad from what you've told me in our conversations, but from everything you've told me he's strong. Something like that can give a guy something to think about you know? But I'm sure he'll be back to himself before long…" Harry's voice trailed off as he drew comparisons between some of the injuries his own father had sustained while wearing his armor. Tony too had refused to let the world see him when he was weak… but Tony had never shut Harry out as Lucius had evidently done with Draco.

Draco never noticed Harry's distraction. "Do you really think so? Do you think it will be alright?"

Harry thought for a moment, wondering just what his relationship was with the blond. Not really friends. He didn't really like the Slytherin; in fact much of what Draco believed disgusted Harry to his core… Did he view the blond as a competitor? Was Draco an adversary? Whatever they were to each other, Harry couldn't bear to see the other boy suffering like this. "If he's half the man you've described to me during our debates, he'll be back to normal in no time Draco, don't you worry about that."

Harry wondered if he had just lied to the boy.

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Still two cars away from the compartment that Neville and Padma had staked out as theirs for the return to Hogwarts, Harry was making his way toward the last passenger car. The discussion he had had with Draco Malfoy preying on his mind. Was there more that he could do to help the boy? Was just being a sympathetic ear enough? It always had been between Franklin Richards and himself, whenever one of their parents had been hurt 'in the line of duty'… but Draco wouldn't be as used to the dangers adults occasionally faced as the children of vigilante heroes, would he?

Harry was so absorbed in his ponderings about Draco Malfoy he almost missed it. Stopping in his tracks he noticed Tracey Davis sitting alone in a compartment.

He had traveled most of the length of the train, and other than Malfoy hadn't seen anyone else sitting alone. That struck him as odd. Tracey was a Slytherin and as a rule they tended to be a bit standoffish, but she was a member of his team. The very least he could do would be to say hello.

Harry knocked on the door before sliding it open.

The strawberry blonde looked up from her book, "Yes?"

"Just wanted to say hi," Harry said as he leaned against the door-frame. "I saw you were all alone in
here and wondered if you'd like a bit of company."

"I'm fine Stark," She raised the book on her lap. "I'm quite used to being alone and I'm using the time to try and get a better understanding of our project."


"From my reading, I've discovered that you've assigned yourself to the most complex portion of the project."

Harry shrugged. "All the parts are important; the device won't work without all of them doing what they're supposed to do. Of the group, I'm the one most exposed to computers and how they work, so my working on the processor design, cribbing ideas from established architecture seemed a natural thing to do." Harry leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "I need to ask a favor."

A single eyebrow lifted. "Yes?"

"I'm going to be asking the group to try and get together for an hour after dinner two or three times a week. If we're going to do this we all need to understand logic, and to understand logic, I'm going to have to introduce the team to binary math."

Tracey looked relieved. "I was afraid that we were going to have to learn that on our own."

"You said at the first meeting that you've been interested in binary math. I suspect that you and I will be the only ones who have been exposed to all that much of it. I'd like you to keep me in line during the sessions," Harry's expression changed to one of embarrassment. "I sometimes go off on odd tangents and find the people I'm trying to explain something to looking at me with their eyes all glazed over. If I start getting too deep into the topic, stop me."

"I can do that," Tracey said with a small smile. "How are you going to start?"

"Bases probably. I've noticed that a lot of people have problems wrapping their minds around anything beyond base 10. I suspect that it will take a session or two before anyone is comfortable with binary." Harry returned her smile. "I'll probably need to do Octal and Hex at the same time, at least the basic concepts anyway. After bases, I'll move on to binary arithmetic, then logic."

"So, you've already got lesson plans drawn up?"

"Pretty much, I lifted them from a few books I read when I was first starting to understand some of my Dad's equipment."

"What's it like?" she asked her eyes shining. "What's it like to live in the Muggle world?"

"I don't know," Harry shrugged. "What's it like living in the magical world? It's all I've ever known. All my life I knew I was somehow different, I could do things that others couldn't, but then other people could do things I couldn't. I just tried to get along, you know?"

"I've never been out into the wider world," Tracey said, dropping her eyes to stare at the floor. "I've only been to Diagon Alley five times."

"Tracey," Harry asked quietly. "Why were you here alone? Outside of class I've never seen you with anyone. Why do you always seem to be alone?"

"I'm a half blood," she whispered. "A Slytherin with a Muggle born mother. I'm not really all that
welcome anywhere. I've learned to find my company in books."

"You would be welcome with my friends Trace. They put up with me, you should have no problem finding friends in our group if you'd like."

"Don't call me 'Trace'! I hate it when people misuse my name."

"Sorry! Pax!" Harry said raising his hands in surrender. "I forget that some people don't appreciate nicknames. Hermione hit the roof the first time I called her 'The Herminator'. Back home my friends and I call each other all kinds of things, its intended as fun, but I'll stop."

"It's ok; I just hate it when people do that... So," she smiled, "tell me about your home and your friends."

Harry never made it back to his original compartment.

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"Tony?"

Stark looked up from his desk to find Pepper standing at his door. Damn, how long had she been standing there? Having Harry gone had him too distracted to focus on anything.

"Yeah Pep? Problem?"

"Tony, there's another Brit here asking to speak to you about Harry."

"So, not Dumbledore this time?" Stark manipulated the controls on his desk and the display monitor shifted to one of the magically hardened security cameras in Pepper's office. The image resolved to show a tall well dressed, dark haired, bearded man playing with a… slinky?

"Sirius Black." Tony breathed.

"Yeah, that's who he said he was. Here's his card," the redhead passed her employer the small rectangle of high quality card stock.

Sirius Black

Lover of Women, Wine and Song

Soldier of Fortune – Professional Life of the Party

Orgy planning, natural inseminations and avoiding jealous husbands are my specialties

Special rates for Hen Parties

A smile quirked at Tony's lips. He turned the card over and was only slightly surprised when it expanded to the size of a sheet of typing paper and new information inscribed itself on the page.

Testimonials from past clients:

Stay away from my wife.
- Cornelius Fudge

Boy, you are a disappointment and a disgrace to the family. You are no son of mine!
I told you to stay away from my wife… And my daughter!
-Cornelius Fudge

Not in the face!
-Another Death Eater

Look at the size of that thing.
-Amelia Bones

Oh Sirius, you were incredible; you've ruined us for other men.
-Hollyhead Harpies

You will rue the day you defied my Black! Your days are numbered.
-Voldemort

What are you doing in my house?... And get off of my wife!
-Paul Parkinson

Damn you, Black.
-Severus Snape

"I thought you might appreciate that," Pepper said with a small smile. "I told him that your earliest
appointment was the day after tomorrow. He thanked me and made the appointment, and then sat
down where he is now saying that he would wait."

Tony could see that Pepper was hesitating. "What is it Pep?"

"Since that Dumbledore person did something to my mind I've been on guard whenever I've been
around a magical..." Pepper bit her lower lip, as if searching for the proper words. "He hasn't done
what Dumbledore did, but there's something about him... something that is making me want to... to
take care of him."

"Bastard." Tony hissed starting to activate the office's weapons suite.

"Tony, no!" Pepper said. "I don't think it's magical, I think its... natural. He puts off the same vibe
you do."

"What?"

"Tony, every woman you meet wants to please you. This Black fellow puts out the same kind of
presence... I don't know... an alpha male vibe. I don't think he's using it maliciously, I just think its
part of who and what he is."

Tony's brow furrowed as he thought about what Pepper had told him. He'd always known that he
had an easier time with women than most men, but... "So he's planning on sitting there playing with
his slinky for two days?"

Now it was Pepper's turn to grin. "He also has a yoyo."

Tony sat down at his desk and thought for a moment. "A yoyo? I had no idea it was this serious.
Well, I guess you'd best show him in."

"So," Tony said after his guest was seated. "What can I do for you Mr. Black?"

The wizard leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "I wanted to get to know you Mr. Stark. I owe you a debt, and I want to get to know the man I owe so much to."

Tony blinked. He certainly hadn't expected that. "And what debt do you believe you owe me Mr. Black?"

"Sirius, please. I was 'Mr. Black' while in school, never liked it."

Stark fought against the smile that tugged at the sides of his mouth. He hadn't liked being called 'Mr.' while in school either. "Sirius then. I'm Tony. Now, about that debt?"

Black took on something of a haunted look. "James Potter was my best friend, and Lily Evans was… someone very special…” the man ran his fingers through his hair. "This isn't coming out right. Let me start at the beginning. I was born into one of the senior families in Magical Britain. Our society is, for better or worse, divided into three camps, the first being the Dark families, those who subscribe to the darker aspects of magic, the magic of pain and death. Powerful stuff. The second camp are the Light families, they for the most part practice the lighter magics, the magic of life and creation. The third and smallest camp is made up of the Neutral families. The Neutrals pick and choose the best application of magic for the situation."

Black paused for a moment, as if unsure that he should continue. "Politically and magically, the Darks and Lights are fairly well matched. It falls to the Neutrals to tip the political balance one way or the other, and certain powerful individuals tip the balance magically. My family, the Blacks has always been as dark as they come. We've a long and bloody history, at some point it was decided that the purity of our bloodline was what made us so powerful, and my family dedicated itself to the destruction of the impure. Muggles, Muggle Born magic users, even half bloods, all were at risk of being attacked by members of my family."

"You paint a rather disturbing picture Sirius," Tony noted. "Though I've heard most of this before from contacts I have with other magic users who have dealt with the European magical societies."

Black nodded. "That was how I grew up, and an arrogant little bastard I was too. Then I left home for Hogwarts. I didn't know anyone, despite growing up in London, the family stayed pretty isolated. My younger brother wouldn't start school until the next year, and I had three older cousins, all girls, going to school at the same time, but they didn't want a little firstie hanging out with them on the train. So I was sitting alone when this other boy pulled his trunk into my compartment without even asking, shoved his trunk into the corner with mine, sat down across from me and introduced himself."

"James Potter?"

"Yeah," Sirius nodded, "though he wanted to call himself 'Jim' at the time. The silly wanker actually thought that it made him sound 'cool'. I knew of his family, notorious light siders. He was an enemy. I think I shocked him when I introduced myself. He was even more isolated that I was, his parents, Harry's paternal Grandparents married late in life, and James was a bit of a surprise. He grew up without any other kids in the area, not even family, but he'd heard stories about the Blacks. I think he half expected me to drink human blood from a skull and I just knew that he only drank fine wines from crystal." The man laughed.
"So there we were, two privileged heirs of old families, and neither of us knew how to deal with kids our own age. We sat staring at each other for a few moments and the train started to pull out from the station and this girl came in. A little red headed thing, obviously a Muggle Born from her clothing, she stands at the door while James and I kept staring at each other, pretending to ignore her. Both of us wanted to talk to the first Muggle born we'd ever seen, but weren't willing to show curiosity in front of the other."

"So this girl, she just looks at the pair of us, puts her hands on her hips and asks: 'What is it with you two? Are all wizards so serious?'

"James broke eye contact with me and looked over at her and said, 'No, just him."

"I couldn't help it. That was the very first time anyone ever did one of those stupid 'serious' jokes about my name, and I thought it was the funniest thing I'd ever heard. I literally fell off the bench laughing. James started laughing too, and the girl left the compartment saying she was going to find somewhere less insane to sit. We didn't find out until later that her name was Lily Evans."

Sirius paused, and then began again. "James and I bonded on the train ride." The wizard took a long sip from the glass that Tony had placed in his hand. "My first friend. My best friend. It was because of James I fought with the sorting hat to go to Gryffindor house instead of Slytherin like every Black before me. Over seven years James became more than my friend when my mother kicked me out of the house for my 'weakness' at fifteen, and James' dad took me in and treated me like his second son. I stood by James when he married that little girl from the train the summer after we left Hogwarts, and I was the third person to hold Harry, the son of my two best friends… my godson."

"That was when I started to fuck everything up. That bloody bastard Voldemort was after the Potters, and they needed to hide. There is a charm for hiding things; it buries a secret that needs to be kept in the mind of a 'Secret Keeper'. The Potters would hide from Voldemort under the Fidelius charm, and I was supposed to be the Secret Keeper… but I had a great idea. I decided that it was far too obvious that I would be the Potter's Secret Keeper, so we should have someone else do it. We had a friend from school, we were all thick as thieves back then, or so we thought. 'Let's make Peter the Secret Keeper, no one would suspect Peter.' I said."

"Except Peter sold the Potters, sold James and Lily and Harry out. He had gone over to Voldemort and given our friends' lives to the bastard. For what, I don't know. I arrived at the house in time to see Hagrid pulling Harry from the rubble. That's when I knew, that the only way Voldemort could have found the house is if Peter told him, and that's when I made my second colossal fuckup in a month. Instead of taking care of my Godson, like I'd promised James and Lily I would, I left him with Hagrid and went after Peter."

Black's hand trembled as he drained the glass in his hand. "I cornered him two days later, on a street in Muggle London, I was going to kill him when he blew up a gas line, thirteen Muggles were killed, and I was almost completely insane, telling everyone that it was my fault that James and Lily were dead. Before I knew it, I was in a cell in Azkaban, and Harry was alone."

"And that's how Harry ended up with the Dursleys?" Stark asked.

"Yeah. Dumbledore did that, knowing that they hated Lily and all magic users." Sirius looked up and stared into Tony's eyes. "Harry was… abused wasn't he?"

"Yes," Tony nodded.

"Damn. My fault. It's all my fault." The man shook himself. "Then you got him. You took my Godson in when I couldn't, and you've made him a… strong, confident young man. You did my job
"Sirius," Tony said, standing up from his desk. "You appear to be a man who could really use a good stiff drink. Are you doing anything for dinner?"

"No."

"Well, let's go. You're coming home with me."

"I know you're busy, I don't want to impose..." Sirius said hesitantly.

"You aren't imposing if you're invited man," Tony said with a wide smile. "Come on, I've got pictures of Harry..."

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"What is Harry doing in this one?" Sirius asked shifting the angle of the photo trying to determine what it was showing.

"That was his second grade play," Tony said with a grin. "He was seven, and was cast as a tree for the play his class wrote about nature. Quite possibly the funniest thing I've ever seen performed. I've got a video of it somewhere, but for maximum effect it has to be seen with the proper audience."

"Proper audience?" Sirius asked as he picked up the next photo.

"Yeah. You'll have to see it with Harry in the room. It embarrasses him to no end, which just makes it so much better."

"That's just cruel." Sirius grinned. "I like it."

"This is the day I took him to that blasted school of yours." Tony said handing over another photo. "I really hate that school, you know? I will only have Harry for a few years and he spends most of his time in that castle now."

"Why is he there?" Black asked. "Since we met the first time I've found out what Albus had tried to do, and you both were pretty insistent that there was no way he would return last summer when Minerva and I came by. What happened that changed your mind?"

"Excuse me Mr. Stark," Jarvis interrupted. "It's getting to half past seven."

Stark blinked. "I must have forgotten something Jarvis, am I scheduled for something tonight?"

The Butler smiled. "The Manhattan Charity Gala Mr. Stark," Jarvis replied in his 'we have company who isn't family' manner. "I believe Ms. Potts has you scheduled as one of the presenters for tonight's occasion."

"Damn," the billionaire said shaking his head. "I can't believe I forgot about that." A smile crept across his lips. "What do you say Sirius? Feel up to a Charity event?"

"Uh..." the wizard hesitated.

"I know, I know," Stark said with a wave of his hand. "Sounds boring. Most of these things are, truth be told. This one though, pretty girls, excellent wines, good food, The Manhattan Gala is always a good time. And a decent tax write off."

"You had me at 'pretty girls'," Sirius admitted while wondering what a 'tax write off' might be.
"The event is Black Tie Mr. Stark." Jarvis said quietly.

"Good point Jarvis thanks," Tony looked Sirius up and down. "We're pretty much the same size… maybe one of my tuxes will fit you…"

"Or," Sirius said with his own grin, "you could show me what the outfit is supposed to look like." He drew his wand. "I am a wizard after all…"

Tony," the woman gushed. "It's so good to see you here!"

Stark turned at the voice, skillfully keeping his distaste for the woman from his expression. "Darlene, it's so nice to see you again."

"I just wanted to meet the mysterious benefactor you brought to our little party" the woman said looking Sirius up and down in a manner that left the wizard feeling somewhat violated, and not in a good way either.

"Sirius is a friend of the family." Stark continued while attempting to lead Black away from the harridan.

"Well," Sirius laughed after they were clear of the predatory female. "That was unpleasant. I actually feared for my virtue there for a minute, and not in a good way."

"It's your own fault for making that sort of donation." Stark noted.

"You said that twenty five thousand was what you normally donated."

"Dollars, not Galleons, Sirius."

"Oh," Sirius seemed embarrassed. "So, that's a lot then?"

It was Tony's turn to laugh. "Enough so that every widow and gold digger in the room has suddenly painted a large bull's-eye on your back…" the man smirked, "instead of mine."

"Ah well," Sirius shrugged. "It does my heart good to know that my donation of Black family monies to a fund for Muggle widows will please my mother to no end. I'm sure she's howling to wake the dead down where ever she is."

"There you are Stark!"

Turning to find a man with a graying buzz cut and mustache approaching at high speed, an unlit cigar clenched in the man's teeth, Tony sighed.

"Finally coming out of the closet eh Stark?"

"I keep telling you Jonah, you aren't my type," Tony said with a small smile. "Have you met Sirius Black? Sirius, this is J. Jonah Jameson, the crusading owner, publisher and Editor in Chief of the Daily Bugle."

"You're the Brit who dropped three hundred large in the collection plate aren't you?" the man called Jameson asked shaking Sirius' hand. "Parker!"

A smallish man appeared holding a camera. "Yes Mr. Jameson?"
"Get a picture of your editor with the other two big contributors Parker," Jameson said throwing an arm around Sirius' shoulder while doing the same to Tony. "Working headline: 'Bugle Publisher Leads Charity Triumph!' Remember that Parker."

"Yes Mr. Jameson," the photographer intoned in feigned enthusiasm.

"Jonah, are you really calling the fifty dollars you donated because I forced you to 'leading' the triumph of this charity event?" an auburn haired woman asked as she stood by the man's side.

Jameson's arm encircled the woman's waist. "Don't forget the tens of thousands of dollars worth of free publicity Marla my love. You remember Tony Stark, right? And the gentleman beside him is Seriously Black."


"Sirius?" the woman asked. "As in the brightest star in the sky? Interesting."

Sirius shrugged. "My family has traditionally given us names based on astronomical objects. My brother was Regulus for example."

A loud rapid series of cracks sounded. Sirius began looking about the room. He hadn't expected fireworks. Those were always fun. His brow furrowed as he noticed that the crowd seemed to suddenly be frightened. That was odd.

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On the dais in front of a band that had stopped playing a masked man dressed all in black raised his HK94 and let loose with another burst of three rounds.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said speaking into the microphone on stage. "This is a robbery. If no one is foolish, then everyone goes home tonight. Let's try and keep the stupidity and death to a minimum tonight shall we? If everyone would please form a line and give my associates your wallets and jewelry in an orderly and efficient manner we will soon be gone from your lives."

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As the crowd was being herded into lines, Peter Parker tensed, his eyes searching for a way for him to disappear into the crowd. The tingle of danger from his spider senses had come just a bit too late to allow him to have made his escape before the robbery had started. Still, all he had to do was fade into the background, slide on his mask and webshooters and these idiots would soon discover that they were having a very bad day.

A hand landed on his shoulder.

"You had best be getting pictures of this Parker." Jameson hissed in his ear.

Damn it, the young photographer thought. He wasn't going to be getting away this time. By now he had spotted seven thieves moving amongst the crowd. As long as it remained a simple robbery he would have to stand down.

But if things became violent…

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The gunshots had Tony suddenly realize that he had left his brief case in the car with Happy.
No armor. Damn it.

He hoped that the gunfire didn't get Happy running in to the middle of the robbery. There were just too many of them, even for a man of Happy's talents.

Why had he allowed himself to become separated from his armor?

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Sirius watched the thieves move through the crowd. Unlike many purebloods, he was fully aware of the capabilities of the weapons in the men's hands. The time that Lily had spent introducing the Marauders to the Muggle world had been more than educational.

One of the thieves backhanded an older woman who refused to give up her wedding ring.

That decided it for him. The Muggles had Heroes. Adventurers who fought crime and defended the weak. Sirius had admired the heroes from the movies that Lily had taken them all too. He could do what he needed to do, and hope that the local ministry would confuse him for just another crime fighter, and that with any luck the crowd would as well. No sense causing the Obliviation Squad any more work than absolutely necessary.

He gripped his wand. He was going to need a disguise… But what?

That's when it hit him. The last movie that Lily had taken them to had been… what was the word? Animated. Still, one of the characters was almost… iconic.

Yes. Sirius knew what his disguise was going to look like.

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Watching his men move through the throng of rich idiots, Jason Talbot, the masked man on the stage was pleased with how well this was going. He had been planning this since he had cased the affair while posing as a waiter at last year's event.

Still, they were on a time table. It wouldn't be long before the cops showed up, or worse yet, some idiot in a costume. That was the problem with New York; it was hard to conduct a little honest crime without some buffoon with a spandex fixation sticking his nose into it. Five more minutes before he pulled the plug.

"Beware villains!" a voice called out. "For you face… The Wizard!"

Talbot's blood ran cold as his eyes flicked to the speaker. The Wizard? They had stumbled into an operation run by that sadistic bastard? But rather than the armored scientist, his eyes found a man with a long white beard wearing a powder blue dress and a tall pointed hat pointing a stick at him.

"Who are you?" Talbot asked the lunatic with the stick.

"I told you," the lunatic responded. "I am," he paused as if for dramatic effect, "The Wizard!"

Talbot relaxed when he saw one of his men, Jimmy Doyle from the look of him, put the barrel of his weapon against the back of the lunatic's head. "You ain't the Wizard fella. I hinked for the Wizard once or twice. This ain't Wittman boss," Jimmy called out. "This guy ain't nothin' to worry about."

"There's already someone calling himself the Wizard?" the lunatic asked.
"Yeah, and you ain't him." Jimmy confirmed.

"Oh." The bearded man seemed somewhat disappointed. "How about 'the Magician' is there someone calling himself 'the Magician'?"

"Not that I know of." Jimmy said.

Talbot was about to direct Jimmy back to his duties when the lunatic smiled. "Oh, good." The wand in his hand twitched and Jimmy’s weapon fell to the floor in pieces, leaving Doyle holding the stock and trigger guard. At the same time the man morphed from appearing to be an ancient cartoon version of a medieval wizard to the personification of a stage magician in top hat and tails.

"Halt Evildoers, for you now face…” once again he paused for effect. "The Magician!"

Talbot found the relief he felt when he realized that this man wasn't the Wizard vanish when he saw the grin on the man's now clean shaven face. Somehow he knew that this wasn't going to end well for him and his crew.

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When the police entered the room to find the thieves hanging from the ceiling, Sirius apparated to a darkened corner of the room and canceled the glamours he had cast for his debut in North American heroing.

That had been a whole lot of fun. For the first time he understood just why some of the heroes Lily had told them about dressed up like they did.

He found Tony Stark staring at him with an amused look in his eyes. "The Wizard?"

"You recognized me?"

"Yes," Stark confirmed. "But I doubt anyone else did. Good job. A little theatrical, but good job."

Sirius had the good manners to at least act embarrassed by the praise.

"Mr. Black?"

Sirius found a short black man at his side. "Yes?"

"Agent Coffers, US Department of Magic." The man presented an official badge. "I'm here to make sure that you're alright."

"How did you know?"

"You registered your magical signature when you entered the country if you recall. The local New York monitoring sensitives noted a sudden spike in your magic, and the fact that you were using more offensive spells. We try and keep an eye on our visitors so that they don't run into too much trouble with our mundane cousins."

"Am I in trouble?" Sirius asked.

"Trouble? Why would you be in…" Agent Coffers asked, puzzled for a moment. "Oh, you're British aren't you? No Mr. Black, you're not in trouble. When you live in a city where we have people who intentionally set themselves on fire and fly, people who have animated prehensile hair, and even the Sorcerer Supreme routinely operating in the open, enforcing something as antiquated and pointless as the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy would be, well, a bit silly. It would take far more than
someone doing magic with a wand to get anyone excited." The man smiled widely. "I'm just here to make sure you are alright and to ease your dealings, if any, with the local police. Though if you've chosen to enter the field of costumed heroics, you will need to register that choice with the Department of Magic as part of any immigration request."

Tony couldn't help but laugh at the expression on Sirius' face.

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Albus Dumbledore moved silently and invisibly through the halls. It was now a full day into the new term and there was something… off about the old castle.

It was more than a little disconcerting. It was if there was a subtle drain on the castle's ancient wards. A drain such as he had never experienced before in all his years as Headmaster. It had begun almost immediately following the return of the students following the Christmas break.

The Headmaster rounded a corner to find a young woman, one he recognized as being Katie Bell, a third year Gryffindor, standing in the hallway and raising a small metallic box to her ear.

"Mum?" she asked the air before issuing forth a squeal of delight. "It works Mum, it really works. It's so good to hear your voice. This is the best Christmas present you and dad could have gotten me!"

Dumbledore stood in shocked amazement listening to the one sided conversation for several moments before continuing on his way. He had enough contact with the Muggle world to recognize a cellular phone, though he didn't think they were supposed to be quite that small, and there was no way that one should work on the Hogwarts grounds, much less in the castle. It was with a stunned realization that he made the association with the odd tower constructed on the outskirts of Hogsmeade in the first week of December on property purchased by Chandrahas Patil.

But how was the Muggle device working?

Still pondering this he ghosted into the Great Hall expecting to find the evening study session that young Stark had started to be able to associate with his friends from other houses.

Music filled the air. A lot of music, from several different sources.

Music wasn't unknown at Hogwarts, there were several Wizarding Wireless receivers in the castle and the Hufflepuff common room even had a hand cranked Victrola that had fallen out of favor by the current generation of students for some reason.

The music being played in the Great Hall however was not coming from a wireless receiver that Dumbledore could recognize, or from a Victrola.

"HA!" a Muggle born 6th year Ravenclaw laughed leaning back from the odd device after inserting a silver disk into its body. The machine began belching out what the Headmaster assumed was supposed to be music. "This is a good one," the boy informed his Pureblood classmate. "The band's called Queen."

Dumbledore looked about the Great Hall. There were at least three other similar machines playing dissimilar music spread about the room, while students were working on class assignments, speaking with friends or just moving to the music in their seats. The ancient wizard spotted individuals with small wires running from smaller boxes to what appeared to be plastic ear muffs on their heads. A few more examples of the cell phone he had seen used in the hallway were in use in corners of the room and small crowds of younger boys seemed to be clustered around individuals holding small devices in their hands with their thumbs working furiously.
Electronic devices working in the castle? This had to be the work of the Potter… Stark boy… but why would he do such a thing?

Dumbledore spent a few moments pondering what his official stand on these devices was going to be before remembering that the first staff meeting of the new term was scheduled to start in five minutes time. Unseen by the students he left the Great Hall on his way to the staff room.

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Dropping the charm that allowed him to travel unobserved, Dumbledore entered the staff room to find the assembled staff crowded around Filius Flitwick and staring at a glowing square of plastic perhaps five inches on a side. The Charms Professor manipulated a few buttons on the device and was rewarded by an atonal voice.

"Knight to Queen's Rook three."

"It plays an interesting, if predictable game," Flitwick was saying. "It does seem odd to not have the feedback and interplay between the individual pieces, but for a game when no one is available it's quite diverting."

"I see that others have noticed the new distractions that have accompanied the students to our school following the holiday." Dumbledore said taking his seat at the head of the table. "Did you confiscate that Filius?"

"Confiscate it?" the charms master asked. "The only reason I would have to do that is if it had been used during one of my classes. No, I purchased it at the Patil/Stark Magical Consumer Electronics shop in Diagon Alley."

"Yes Albus," Minerva McGonagall said while taking her seat, "from what I understand from some of my seventh years, devices like Filius' Chess Player seem to have been quite popular for Christmas gifts this year."

"I was just in the Great Hall." Dumbledore said, looking over his half moon glasses at his staff. "The 'study session' has taken on aspects of a party with music and loud conversations rather than the discussion on subjects and debates it has known before."

"They're excited about their new toys Albus, it's nothing to be getting worried about." Filius said with a wide smile. "The novelty will wear off and the students will be back to normal in no time."

"I agree." Snape said from his position at the table. "These silly toys are simply fads, much like that silly multicolo"red cube that was so popular a few years ago, or the Muggle metal spring toys and yoyos from my time here as a student." Snape studiously ignored the fact that Flitwick had caught him attempting to break the record for the most stairs descended by one of the aforementioned 'spring toys' in the waning days of his 5th year. "They will be the only thing the dunderheads think about for a while and then they will fade away, like so many fads before them." Of course being Severus Snape he couldn't let the topic go without a bit of snark. "Assuming of course the fad isn't encouraged by the staff…" he said regarding the chess machine with a jaundiced eye.

"Knight to King's Knight seven" the little chess playing machine's voice intoned. "Check."

"Check?" Filius squeaked while peering at the lighted screen. "You sneaky bloody machine."

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"Wait, wait, wait," Daphne Greengrass interrupted. "Are you trying to tell us that one and one make
Harry managed to keep the grin off his face. He had been expecting that question, but he had expected it to come from Zabini or Entwhistle.

"No, not really, and sort of." He responded.

"Well, that clears that question up." Millie Bulstrode snarked.

"Well," Harry grinned at the Slytherin's comment, "If by 'ten' you mean a one in the second digit to the left of the decimal with a zero in the first, then yes, in base two, one and one makes ten. However almost no one reads binary notation as a string of one and zeros. Most either translate the numbers into decimal in their heads, or read the display in Octal or Hexadecimal depending on their preference."

"Octal?" Blaise asked.

"Base eight, the notation runs from zero to seven." Tracey Davis answered.

Harry noticed that Daphne shot Tracey a glare before asking her next question. "I'm sure I'm going to be sorry I asked, but what is 'hexadecimal'?"

"Base 16," Harry answered turning to the chalk board and began writing a long string of ones and zeros.

"Base 16?" Hermione asked. "How does that work?"

"Well," Harry answered moving from his string of numbers to another section of the board. "Getting a bit off topic for this discussion, but I guess that now the question is out there you'll all want to know the answer. Well, zero through nine are all what you're used to from decimal. Nine hex plus one is… Anyone?"

"A" Padma answered.

"Yes," Harry said while writing the numbers one through nine and adding an 'A' in the 10th position. "And 9hex plus two is… 'B', and 'C', and 'D', and 'E', and 'F', then the first digit returns to zero and the second digit becomes a one. In base 16, ten is a decimal 16, in Octal, 10 is decimal eight."

"So in binary, 10 is decimal two?" Su Li asked quietly from her seat.

"Exactly," Harry smiled before writing a long list of ones and zeros on the board. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

"---00000000---"

Padma waited until the last of the students left the classroom they had used for the meeting. She had insisted that Harry go with Hermione and put the finishing touches on the essay he had due for Charms the next day.

"I'll clean up Harry," she had said over her friends' objections.

Hermione had a questioning look on her face, but seemed to understand that she should take Harry back to the common room and leave Padma alone, so she guided the boy from the room, closing the door behind them as the exited.
Padma straightened the tables and cleaned the chalk board with a wave of her wand, then she went to the storage locker allocated to their project and removed Harry's proof of concept device, the 8 bit counter.

Placing the block of etched sandstone on the tabletop she sat in front of it and withdrew her notes from the Christmas hols. Touching her wand to the activation point, she watched carefully as the first of the lights came on, starting the binary sequence.

Something was wrong, she was sure of it, but she couldn't figure out precisely what it was that was bothering her about the device. There was just something about it that…

The first light slowly faded to darkness; after a moment, the second lit, indicating 2. After along pause, the first light brightened once more, indicating 3.

As the lights continued their stately dance of ordered measures of dark and light, the young witch was more than aware that she might be imagining things, or that she had misunderstood something in her readings on Electronic Computers over the holidays. Further she didn't want to go to anyone with her concerns…

The first three lights all gradually lit up. 7.

Harry never seemed to mind having his errors pointed out during their studies, but her questioning this would be directly challenging him in a field where among their group he was in undisputed subject matter expert. How would he react to being questioned?

Padma bit her lower lip and continued to ponder the counter as the light that signified the number 16 lit and all the previous lights winked out. It was times like this she almost envied Parvati's lackadaisical attitude toward her studies. Parvati would never challenge a friend.

Was the problem that the counter was just too complex for her to analyze with her admittedly limited experience? Perhaps a simpler device was what she needed to either calm her concerns or generate the evidence she needed to talk to Harry?

From her book bag she pulled the notes she had compiled over the holidays. There had been an apparently simple device she had come across in her research… There, a half adder. The logic diagram showed a device that consisted of the symbol of an AND gate and an Exclusive OR… She then pulled out the notes Harry had given her on the runes he had used to emulate various logic functions.

She rose from her seat and returned to the supply cabinet, selecting a think sheet of sandstone and returned to her chair. On the list of things to do with the project was finding a better medium for their carvings, but for now the sandstone was good enough.

Picking up a stylus, she lightly made the first etchings for the first cluster. She looked up to the counter to see that it had reached 53. This binary stuff was easier than she had thought it would be… but there was something about the counter that nagged at her… something was… not right.

Padma returned to her light etching. She would figure it out.

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Following the scent the hound slowly made his way from tree to tree, pausing occasionally to let it be known that he had passed this way with a brief spray of urine against a tree.

Squirrel!, the cognitive portion of his mind chanted over and over, naming the scent and giving an
image of the creature he sought to focus on. Like most of his species the dog hated squirrels and delighted in the chase that the smaller creatures offered…

But there was something… odd about this squirrel. The scent was somehow wrong. The mutt lacked the intelligence needed to pin point exactly what might be different or wrong about this scent, but he somehow knew on a visceral level that he wouldn't be eating this squirrel should he catch it.

Still… the fun was in the chase.

The dog followed the scent trail to a small clearing in the woods to find his quarry reared on its hind legs in the center of the small meadow. With a loud bark he launched himself at the squirrel, only to slide to a haul when the smaller creature didn't react to his charge.

The tiny squirrel simply turned to face the dog and spread its forelegs wide with an odd look of triumph when the dog's large brown eyes locked with the blood red eyes of the squirrel.

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Harry Potter and The Invincible TechnoMage

Chapter Sixteen - Year Two Spring Term

"Moonie!" Sirius called as he entered the cottage the pair shared when Lupin wasn't at Hogwarts. Remus should be at the school, but he sometimes stopped by in the evenings for a quiet place to grade his papers.

Or perhaps not quite so quiet an evening, Sirius thought as he noticed the empty wine bottle on the table by the sofa and what appeared to be almost enough discarded clothing for two people of opposing genders.

In a smooth movement he scooped a almost microscopic bit of blood red silk from the floor. A thong? The Dog animagus took a deep whiff of the bit of cloth... hmm. No one he knew.

"Padfoot? What are you doing back?" the obviously flustered bare-chested werewolf asked emerging from his bedroom.

"I live here," Sirius pointed out dryly. "In fact I own the place."

"Look Sirius, I..." Lupin began.

"Remus!" a female voice called from the Professor's room, "What are you doing? My feet are cold, get back in here."

"Just a second Aurora," the werewolf said, a blush spreading across his upper torso.

A grin spread across Black's face. "Aurora? Aurora Sinestra?" He asked trying to push past his friend for a peek in the door. "You lucky bastard. She would never give me the time of day. What are her boobies like?"

"Sirius!" Remus responded, pushing Sirius away from access to his lady friend. "I swear to Merlin himself, if you queer this for me..."

"I'd never do that to you Remus... Just one peek."

"Sirius Black, if you as much as think about coming in this room," The Astronomy Professor called out, "I will finish what I started in '74."

Sirius paled. When Aurora was a 7th year Slytherin and Sirius a 5th year Gryffie he had made an ill
thought out pass at the older woman, emphasized by his traditional slapping of her ass. Her cutting
curse had almost had him joining the school choir as a castrato for something to pass the time in the
evenings.

"Wouldn't think of it Aurora!" Sirius lied, convincingly he hoped.

"You had best not." Sinestra said imperiously. "Remus, get your mangy ass back in here and finish
what you started."

"I'd best be getting back..." Remus said with a grin while gathering the clothing in the room with a
quiet 'Accio!' "Try not to be scratching at the door Padfoot... Oh by the way, her breasts are
amazing."

As the door closed Sirius looked to the bit of red silk lace in his hand and tried to think of a way to
turn the situation to his advantage. Then he got distracted by the thought of the boobies he wasn't
going to pay homage to, and became very sad.

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Sirius lay in his bed staring at the ceiling. They had been at it for three solid hours.

Damn Remus anyway. Didn't he know that he wasn't supposed to be the one to bring home a
woman for long sessions of noisy sex? That was Sirius' job. Hell, Sirius had been the one who
started the whole tradition of not using privacy charms during encounters...

It was not as funny, Sirius reflected, on this side of the door. Trust Remus to be the one to ruin that
joke.

Oh, revenge would be his, Sirius vowed. And it would be sweet.

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Padma sat quietly in the classroom set aside for the use of their project team, a series of lights
blinking in front of her.

She had had found the flaw in Harry's proof of concept device. The lights in front of her were
confirmation of the error. This was the seventh time she had checked her original results, and each
time the output was the same.

How could she tell her friend? How could she tell the rest of the team?

Her discovery called into question the viability of the entire project.

Hermione entered the room. "I found him," she said taking her seat across from Padma and looking
at the etched sand stone forms. "He was in Greenhouse 2 with Neville going over something he
didn't understand from yesterday's lesson. He'll be here in a few minutes."

Padma sighed and nodded.

"How bad is it?" Hermione asked while gesturing at the two runic forms between them. "Did you
discover something?"

"Hey," Harry called as he opened the door. "What's up?"

"It's the project Harry, I think I've found a problem."
Harry's smile disappeared. "Well, that's not good. What's wrong."

"There was something about your counter that bothered me, I mean after I did some reading on logic circuits, when ever I watched your counter do it's work something was just... wrong."

"I'm not sure I see what you are getting at Padma, it counts just fine. I watched it through all 8 digits a dozen times, at least. It took forever"

"I know, I couldn't figure out what was bothering me, but something was." Padma brushed a few errant hairs from her eyes. "I decided that your counter was too complex for me to figure out the way it was so I made this." she indicated the smaller sheet of sandstone.

Harry peered at the symbols on the form. "An exclusive OR and an AND, you've made a single digit half adder?"

"Yes. Now watch." With graceful fingers Padma set the A input to 'On' and the B input to 'Off', and then touched her wand to the charge point.

After a short pause Harry smiled as the light came on, but suddenly his smile faded, and he sat down with a thump.

"Shit!"

"Language Harry!" Hermione said.

Padma nodded sadly. "You've spotted the problem then?"

"What?" Hermione demanded. "What's the problem? You added 1 and 0 and got 1, I don't understand what the two of you are seeing."

"The time Hermione," Harry said shaking his head. "A half adder is just about the simplest logic construct there is an it took half a second to add 1 and 0."

"The Actual time is about a fifth of a second, but yes. the transit through two logic gates is a fifth of a second." Padma corrected.

"So? A fifth of a second seems awfully fast to me." Hermione protested.

"A fifth of a second through two gates Hermione," Padma corrected again.

"A computer would be using hundreds of thousands of gates for the simplest operations."

"Oh. OH!" Hermione exclaimed as realization dawned on her. "The Project... We're going to fail."

"And it's my fault." Harry said

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The beam of energy impacted on the glowing blue sphere causing the color to darken just the slightest bit.

"Damn it!" Tony Stark spat, "less than 2 percent drop in the shield value."

"You'll never make it heroes!" the madman responsible for the shielded bomb laughed. "I've analyzed all your weapons Ironfool. You'll never defeat my shield technology before my bomb vaporizes New York."
"Oh, shut up," the Captain suggested as he slammed his red, white, and blue shield into the madman's face, dropping him to his knees insensible. "Ok people," Rogers continued, now addressing the assembled Avengers, "We've got seven minutes to defuse this damned thing. Ironman, what are our options?"

"He's right," Tony said, scanning the shield diagnostic on his Heads Up Display, "I won't be able to counter the shield in time." Two arrows impacted the shield sphere arcing blue lightning as they did so. "Your shock arrows aren't going to do it either Hawkeye."

"Had to try," Clint Barton said with a shrug. "Anyone else got any ideas? We're running out of time and I hate harp music."

"There are no Harps in Fólkvangr, nor in Valhalla Hawkeye. Nay, there waits the rewards due warriors true. But thou needst not concern thyself with thy eternal rewards, the Valkyries will not be traveling for us this day!" the Odinson said quietly at the armored Avenger's side. "Friend Ironman, methinks thou dost ignore the obvious solution in thy devotion to mortal man's tools." With a wide smile the Thunder god hefted his enchanted battle mallet. "Mjolnir is not so easily countered" With all his strength Thor struck the glowing shield with a mighty blow.

Inside his armor Tony barely managed to get his sound dampeners on line before the impact of the mystical hammer on the force field, the rest of the Avengers were buffeted by the shock wave of the impact. Tony was marginally surprised when the shield held, despite dropping its integrity by 23 percent. An incoming message indicator started blinking for his attention.

He cursed himself for not getting around to upgrading his messaging system to use caller ID, still very very few people had this number, and a good number of them were standing around him.

"This better be important," he barked as he opened the connection and shut down his external speakers with a cybernetically enhanced thought.

"Dad?" Harry's voice came over the circuit. "Dad, I screwed up."

"Harry? Are you alright son? Are you hurt?" a myriad of horrible scenarios played out in Tony's mind, all of them resulting in Harry using his last breath to call and say good bye.

"It's my computer project Dad. I made some really stupid assumptions and when Padma did her testing she..."

There was another unholy shock wave that overwhelmed the armor's sound dampeners. After the tremendous noise there was silence on line for a moment, then Harry spoke again. "What the heck was that?"

"Thor is attempting to break down a force field with his hammer," Tony explained before turning his external speakers on again. "You're doing it Thor, one more should break it down completely." Silencing his connection to the Avengers Tony continued. "Harry, part of any project is discovering that your first assumptions were wrong, because they almost always are. You only have a few options, one is to change your assumptions, a second is to fix what ever went wrong to invalidate your assumption, a third is to cut your losses and move on. Talk to your team, brainstorm with them about what you need to do."

"I'm sorry Dad, I didn't know you were working. I'll let you go, thanks for the advice."

"Be safe Harry," Tony said as Thor shattered the shielding protecting the bomb.

"I've got this one," Hank Pym said as he shrunk down to his Yellowjacket mode. "It's so much easier
Harry took his customary seat at the table for the nightly study session. Over the last few weeks something of a detente had been established in the Great Hall for these sessions and the music of the night was selected by the drawing of lots. Tonight was a Head Banger night, and Iron Maiden's *Fear of the Dark* started pounding out of one of the boom boxes at the far end of the Hall. A surprising number of the upper class Slytherins had become huge fans of Heavy Metal, some going as far as approaching younger students with links to the Muggle world about obtaining new music.

A third year Gryffindor had gotten his older nonmagical brother to join the Britannia Music Club and the pair were making money hand over fist supplying music CDs to purebloods.

"Do they have to play that horrible stuff?" Hermione huffed as she sat down across from Harry with Padma taking her seat to his left. Hermione had made her preference of Classical music nights very well known.

"I agree," Luna Lovegood said as she took her seat next to Padma while Melody Spinnet sat next to Hermione. "Iron Maiden is so derivative. Give me a good Lynyrd Skynyrd album any day." She paused as her large grey eyes seemed to fill with unshed tears and then she sighed. "The good ones always go before their time."

It was only then she noticed the others staring at her. "Sorry, I like Molly Hatchet too."

"Ok," Harry said, refusing to rise to the bait and ask the odd girl why Southern Rock appealed to her so much or where she had encountered those particular bands. "What is the topic for tonight?"

"Our schedule has us going over colour change charms," Hermione said checking on her study calendar. "But I think we should discuss what we're going to do about the project."

"That would be a mistake," Harry said shaking his head. "The problem we're having with the Project is something we will either solve or we won't. The charms assignment is for here and now."

"We've got charms work due as well," Melody Spinnet interjected as the group pulled their assignments from their bags. "So Luna and I can keep an eye on you and make sure you don't make any mistakes."

The two first years laughed as the second years rolled their eyes in unison.

Hermione's review of the most common wand motions for color change charms was interrupted by Neville and the two youngest Weasleys coming to their table. Both Neville and Ginny had made something of a habit of studying with the Ravenclaws on occasion, usually just before a test. Ron on the other hand rarely even came to the Great Hall during the Study period.

"Hey Harry, sorry to interrupt, but I got an Owl from my Gran today saying that she had finally gotten hold of your Dad through the Patils and that it was ok for me to visit you this summer."

"That's great Nev, We'll have a blast. The guys back home all want to meet you," Harry laughed.

"Hi Luna," Ginny said trying very hard not to stare at Harry, "have you started on the Herbology essay?"
"No, not yet, Melody and I are working on our charms assignments."

"Want to join us Ginny?" Melody asked.

"Oh, yes, if you don't mind." the redhead said sliding on to the bench next to Luna.

"You're all mental," Ron joked. "I mean it, always studying."

Harry looked up with a sarcastic response on his lips when he spotted a small brown head peeking out of Ron's robes.

"You've got a rat?" Harry asked. "Could I see him?"

Ron looked at Harry suspiciously, "see him? Why? Are you taking the Mickey? I know that a rat isn't a cool pet, but he's all I've got."

"No Ron, I love rats," Harry said. "My first pet was a rat from a friend's dad's research lab. He only had a number, but I named him Snowball because he was white." Harry accepted the squirming animal from the redhead.

"His name's Scabbers," Ron said. "That's weird."

"What is?" Harry asked looking up from the rat.

"It almost seems like he's... surprised to see you."

Indeed the rat appeared to be staring at Harry's face with his mouth hanging open as if in shock.

"He just knows a good looking guy when he sees one. You're a fat fella aren't you?" Harry said stroking the rodent, "Oh oh, looks like you lost a toe there Scabbers, you need to be careful." Harry began scratching behind the rat's ears, causing the animal's left rear leg to start thumping. "I've never really understood where Rats got such a bad reputation."

"Well, there was that whole 'Black Plague' thing," Hermione interjected.

"A couple of guys get a few fleas and everyone blames them, huh Scabbers?" Harry said with a smirk. "How long have you had this guy Ron?"

"I got him last year," Ron said taking his pet back and placing him in a pocket. "But Percy had him first, since before I can remember."

"What?" Harry asked, a look of confusion crossing his face. "Wow, that's one powerful rat. I didn't even know there were magical rats."

"What are you on about Harry?" Padma asked.

"I got my Snowball when he was just over a year old, and he died about a year and a half later. The normal life expectancy of a European Brown Rat is between 18 months and 3 years," Harry said with a shrug. "This little guy is going on three times that from the sound of things. He's got to be magical, or the Weasley's are feeding him something special."

"No," Ron said. "Scabbers just gets table scraps."

"I've had Molly's cooking," Luna chimed in. "Even the scraps from Molly Weasley's table are something special."
"Thanks Luna," Ron said with a blush. "I wonder what a Magical Rat can do?"

"Probably make more rats," Hermione said dismissively.

Ron just looked at Hermione for a moment before turning on his heel and stalking away. Neville exchanged looks with Harry, and then went after his dorm mate.

"That was rude Hermione," Padma pointed out.

Hermione blushed. "I know, I'm sorry, and I'll find Ron and apologize later, but we're supposed to be working on Charms."

"That's not it, you've never minded open discussions before, and it's not like we're behind." Harry said. "What's wrong?"

Hermione wouldn't meet his eyes. "Why didn't you invite Padma and me to visit you in New York?"

"Well, for one thing, my Dad has some business in Wakanda when school lets out and I'm going with him. We're heading back to the states with a single open seat on the plane and Dad said we could stop over in London if one of my friends wanted to visit for a couple of weeks."

"One seat?" Hermione asked in a very small voice.

"Dad's not going to be around much this summer because of business and other interests, so the only people at home will be me and Jarvis, and that didn't really seem to be conducive to having a girl over. Then I'd have to choose between you two, and I wouldn't want to do that. Besides, there's nothing wrong with wanting to hang out with a couple of guys."

"We understand Harry," Padma said sending a furious glare Hermione's way.

"Besides, you've both been out of the UK, several times. Neville travelled out of England the first time last year on the Hogwarts Express. I think he's over due for an adventure."

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"Hermione, what's wrong with you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about Padma."

"You were rude to Ron and then miffed at Harry for inviting Neville to visit over the holiday. That's so unlike you," Padma pulled Hermione to a seat on one of the benches that lined the hallway outside the entrance to Ravenclaw tower. "What's going on?"

"I just thought that he might invite me to New York, or you. I mean we're his friends, he stays with us when he comes to the UK..."

"So you only offered your home in hopes of an invitation to his?" Padma asked.

"Of course not!"

"Then what's the problem?" Padma persisted.

Hermione hung her head, unable to meet Padma's gaze. "I never really had any friends before coming to Hogwarts... Then I met Harry on the train, and you at the Welcoming feast, and Sue and Hannah. Neville was there too, but he was mostly not really involved with the group, not really. I guess I was just being jealous."
"I know I teased you on the Express back in September, but have you decided that you want Harry for a boyfriend?"

"What?" Hermione asked surprised by the question. "No! Ew, that would be like dating my brother."

"Well then, what's the problem?" Padma asked unable to explain to herself the sense of relief she felt at Hermione's declaration.

"I don't want to lose my friend Harry," Hermione said quietly. "If he starts hanging out with Neville all the time, when would he have time for me?"

Padma took her friend's hand. "Would you like to know a secret?"

Hermione nodded and Padma continued. "You are an idiot."

Hermione stood, shocked that Padma would say such a thing.

Padma paid no attention. "Sit down Hermione. First you throw a hissy fit over Harry not telling you who his body guard was, then your only reaction to the speed problem with the project is 'we're going to fail' and now you're angry at him and rude to other people because he dared to invite Neville over to stay at his house for a visit this summer. Keep this up an he won't be wanting anything to do with you. You've got to learn to deal with your jealousy."

"I'm not jealous." Hermione said, taking her seat again.

"Of course you are," Padma said dismissively. "So am I. Neville is the one who is getting to go to New York and see those Heroes you're always telling me about. Just imagining that he's going to be seeing those people who can fly without brooms, people who are capable of walking up the walls of a building, and that he might actually meet that armored man who works for Harry's father is almost maddening. I'm jealous that he's going to get to ride in one of the flying machines. I can't even imagine that, and Neville is going to do it."

"So what should I do?"

"What do you do when you're jealous of my beauty?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Your beauty? What happened to Padma? We seem to have a Parvati infestation here."

"Exactly my point. Tease him, make jokes. Don't get upset, that makes you look bad."

Hermione sighed. "You're right. I'm sorry."

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"I'm glad you could make it Harry," Remus Lupin said as the son of one of his best friends entered his classroom. "How has your day been?"

"Just fine Professor," Harry said as he took his seat in front of the man's desk. No doubt this was going to be the latest of the man's 'connecting Harry with his past' meetings.

"I've notice that you and your two closest friends have been rather intensely concerned about something during your evening study session. All three of you do your required assignments first, but then move on to some project that doesn't seem to involve any of the school texts. I asked to speak with you to see if there was anything I could do to help."
Harry shrugged. "We're experiencing some difficulties with the OWL project we've chosen is all. When we did our initial tests we didn't take into account the rate at which runic scripts charge and discharge before returning to a ready state."

Remus blinked. 'Runic scripts'? 'charge and discharge'? 'ready state'? he didn't recognized any of those concepts. He knew runes of course, but a runic script? What could that possibly be? Still, it wasn't very professorial to display ignorance. "What steps have you taken to counter the problem?"

The boy shrugged, "well, we're not sure what to do yet. The next meeting with the whole team is tonight, and we plan to try a brainstorming session to try and come up with alternatives to what we've done so far."

"Well, if you need any help, remember you can always come to me."

"Thank you sir."

Remus tried to think of anything to keep the conversation going. "Have you been enjoying the Invisibility Cloak?"

"Oh, yes. That is seriously cool."

"I do hope you haven't been up to too much mischief with it." Remus said with a smile.

"Oh, no sir. I played with it for a few minutes, and then packed it away to keep it safe. Seeing as its a family heirloom, I didn't want anything to happen with it until I can test it properly." the boy said.

Packed away? He had just packed away James' cloak? James had carried that cloak with him everywhere he went from the first day of classes first year. How was it his son would just pack it away?

"I want to see exactly how it does its invisibility thing, you know, test it through all the EM bands, and see if I can't duplicate the effect on other objects. If the invisibility is as all inclusive as it seems, then being able to duplicate the effect would be quite useful." the boy continued as Remus tried to figure out just what was wrong with the boy.

"So you aren't using it for pranking?"

"No, I've never really been one for organized pranking. A joke can be funny, even a joke at someone else's expense, but to specifically set out to embarrass someone? That's just stupidly cruel." Harry hesitated for a moment. "I know about the Marauders, and I know who they were."

"How did you find that out?" Remus asked incredulously.

"The Head Student Journals for each year are kept in the Library. You have to ask Madam Pince about them, but they're available. When I got here, Professor Snape absolutely hated me on sight, so I was curious as to why. In my first potions class we had something of a confrontation, and he made quite clear his distaste for my biological father. It takes a lot of hatred to still be that violently opposed to someone more than a decade after their death, so I tried to research James Potter. There are several entries in the Head Student Journals from his time in school that mentioned the Marauders, and named the members. There were more entries that detailed the multi-year war between my biological father and his friends, including yourself and Mr. Black and those aligned with Professor Snape."

Remus had forgotten about the those journals, he wondered if the boy had found his entries into James' Journal. He smiled. "Good times."
"No sir," Harry disagreed. "With all due respect, stupid times. The way both sides acted was, excuse me sir, childish and dangerous to a point that its a wonder that no one was killed. It generated bad feelings to the point where Professor Snape hated me immediately upon laying eyes on me. Both sides were idiot bullies who didn't really care who got caught in the splatter as long as the embarrassed their rivals. The Head Journals of those years make note of the innocents caught in the crossfire Professor... even, or perhaps especially my biological father's."

Remus paled a bit. Harry had found his entries after all... "Harry, we were children."

"Sir, the 'prank war' with Professor Snape continued through your seventh year when all of you were seventeen, and adults. I know what Sirius Black did that something almost got Severus Snape killed. I know that James Potter had to step in and prevent from happening and I know that you were involved some how. You weren't children by the time, and even if you had been, I'm only twelve years old and I know that what both sides were doing is wrong. My biological mother was quite upset by whatever happened and she had some rather nasty things to say about Mr. Black following the incident. She didn't go into the details of the incident, but it was clear that she was pissed."

Remus was silent for several moments. "Is that why you don't like me Harry? Because of my affiliation with the Marauders?"

"Professor, I really couldn't care less that you were one of the Marauders. You seem to have made a life for yourself beyond your actions while in school. My problems with you have nothing to do with your sense of humor."

"What is it then? I was one of your father's best friends."

"Professor, you've never met my father, which is one of the problems. I will always be grateful for the life that James Potter and Lily Evans Potter gave me, but they are not my parents. Every time you speak to me about things outside of school there is always an unspoken comparison with James Potter going on in your mind. I can see it quite clearly. In your own way, you are as blinkered by your past as Professor Snape. You're boggled that I have no interest in the sadistic bullying that you called 'pranking' during your time in school, because I am after all, the son of James Potter. I don't care for the comparison, I really don't."

"Sirius said much the same thing to me before I took this position." Remus said hanging his head. "I will try not to compare you to my old friend."

"There is more than that Sir. You want me to trust and love you, that's obvious every time we speak, but I can't."

"But... why?"

"Professor, my earliest memories are pain and hunger. I didn't know my name until I went to school. The Dursleys always called me 'Boy' or 'Freak'. Nothing I ever did was good enough, nothing could ever get them to love me. I used to dream that someone would take me away, would save me. But who could? At the time I didn't know anyone who could have come for me, but now I do. I know that my biological parents were dead and couldn't help me. I know my official Godfather was falsely imprisoned and couldn't come to help me. I know I had two unofficial Godfathers as well. Peter Pettigrew has been dead for years, but you were alive sir. You could have come to at very least check on the only child of your best friend. You could have, but you never did."

"Harry!"

"No sir, as far as I've been able to find out, you never even tried. It fell to another man entirely to
rescue me. That man is my father, Tony Stark. He got me through the pain and the nightmares and even though he had absolutely no connection to my birth parents he loved me and allowed me to love him." The boy wiped at his eyes with is left hand. "No sir, I don't like you. When I needed you, you were no where to be found. Well, I don't need you any longer and quite honestly I resent you comparing me to a dead man I've never known. I know that I know nothing of what you were going through at that time, or if you ever really tried to find me, all I know is that you never came."

"Professor Dumbledore..."

"Left me on a door step in the dead of the night." Harry interrupted. "And then he attempted to have my adoption declared void. The Headmaster and I have our own trust issues Professor. All I really know about the situation is how I feel, because no one has ever told me anything about why I was growing up with a family who didn't want me and made sure that I knew I wasn't wanted every single minute of every single day. The way I feel may not be fair to you, or even logical, but it is the way I feel. I respect you sir, you are one of the best teachers I've ever had and your classes are fun and full of useful information, but I do not and probably will not ever like you. I resent you too much for what I perceive that you didn't do. I'm sorry sir, it might not be fair, but that's the truth."

"A fifth of a second?" Daphne asked incredulously. "You're worried about a fifth of a second?"

The Project team was meeting in their assigned classroom. The members had come expecting to be covering the beginnings of Harry's lessons on binary logic but had been greeted with news that there was a problem.

"It's cumulative," Padma said dejectedly. For a complex addition of multiple digits it could take a dozen seconds. Multiplication and division could take minutes."

"The whole point of the machine is high speed complex operations," Harry explained.

"No," Tracey disagreed. "The point of the machine is to allow us to show some creativity in combining disciplines, even if it turns out to be slow, it still allows us to do that."

That comment garnered her sneers from the rest of the Slytherin contingent. "Besides," she continued, "even with the speed of operation you're predicting from these adders, it's still on par with the first generation of the Muggle Electronic computers, and probably faster than Babbage's Analytical Engine, if he had ever managed to build it."

"Has anyone considered methods of speeding the flow of magic through the rune sets?" Li asked. "by designing a more efficient rune scripts to mimic logic functions, or perhaps a better medium for the rune etching?"

"Tracey and Li both make good points," Hermione noted. "Maybe before we get too deep into the project we should take a look at optimizing our rune sets and the etching medium. Maybe the problem is that Sandstone isn't really the best medium for moving the magic with any real speed."

Daphne nodded. "That's a good point. We know that as far as a charging rune stone goes, granite is best with sandstone as a distant second. Maybe to get what we need to do is find out what material is best for the data transfer."

"Thanks for your help tonight Tracey," Harry said when he looked up from his notes to find he was
alone with the second year Slytherin.

"I didn't do anything. You were all panicking over nothing. I don't know what Granger and Patil were so worried about, but I think you're too used to dealing with machines infinitely more powerful than anything we're likely to make here."

"Yeah," Harry sighed. "I over reacted."

"I've been wanting to ask you a few questions about your life in the Muggle world anyway," she said while digging in her book bag. She withdrew a well thumbed magazine and opened it to a page of photographs. "Is this man really a... machine?"

Harry looked down to find a photo of the Vision in front of him. "Well, yeah, sort of, but not... Yes. Yes he is."

Tracey raised an eyebrow. "That was the most qualified 'yes' I've ever heard."

"The Vision is an android, that's a machine made to look like a man. He's a special kind of android called a 'Synthazoid'. His body is designed to emulate the body of a human on almost every level with certain enhancements, but what makes the Vision special isn't his body, it's his mind."

"He's some kind of super computer, right?"

"Yes... no. Not really. A hyper capable computer is what makes up his brain. I was talking about his mind."

"I don't understand," Tracey said, a confused expression on her face.

"Ok, think about two people, you and me for example. Our actual physical brains are awfully similar, you know? The people who research things like that have got the basic structures and what they do fairly well identified and mapped out. But our minds... the things that make us, us, those are very different. The Vision has a mind based on the mental patterns of a living human being."

"He has an artificial mind based on an organic mind?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know, what is a mind, really? Is one generated by an organic brain really different than one generated by an electronic device?" Harry hesitated for a moment. "There are a lot of artificial intelligences out there, some are beneficial, some are destructive, and some just want to be left alone to pursue their ambitions."

"It must be so exciting to have grown up around people like that." Tracey sighed.

Harry looked embarrassed. "I remember when I first started living with my Dad, and every day was such an adventure, meeting so many special people. After a while though, they quit being 'special' in my mind and just became... people. Everyone thinks that the life they've led and the people they grew up with to be 'normal', you know?"

"I suppose," Tracey sighed. "I just wish I could see some of the things you've seen."

"There's no reason you won't," Harry said returning to his notes. "We've only got five more years here until we're free to make our own way in the world. Maybe you'll travel to see the world, maybe you'll pull on a mask and fight bad guys, maybe you'll cure some horrible disease. We're only twelve Tracey, who knows what we'll do?"

Later, Tracey would never be able to explain just why she did it, not even to herself. She stood from
her seat at the table and moved to stand next to where Harry was working. He looked up from his notes and the Slytherin took his face in her hands before planting a light kiss on his lips.

Tracey grabbed her bag and fled the room before Harry could react. As the door closed behind the girl, he lightly touched his lips with the fingers of his left hand.

Was that a 'lets be friends' kiss?

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From: "Harry"

To: "Dear Old Dad" tstark_

Sent: Monday, April 12, 1993 11:59:50 PM GMT

Subject: Help!

Sorry about bothering you when you were 'working' the other day. We discovered a major problem with the magical computer project. It seems that the way I've got the system set up, it takes a full fifth of a second for a single stage half adder to produce an output.

Yeah, I panicked.

The group brainstormed the way you recommended and one of the members pointed out that even as slow as they are, the prototypes we're testing are functioning on the same level as the first generation electronic main frames, and are probably faster than Babbage's Analytical Engine would have been.

Still, we're going to do a few experiments to see if we can come up with more efficient logical gate structures and testing a few other materials to use as the medium for logical flow.

It has been suggested that my exposure to super computers has given me some unrealistic expectations. All I know is that I've been feeling particularly stupid since Padma pointed out what I'd done wrong. Hanging out with smart, pretty girls has it's points, but there are also some real drawbacks through ego damage.

Anyway, speaking of smart pretty girls, I've got a problem and seeing as I've demonstrated that I don't understand girls in any way, shape, or form, I need your help.

One of the girls on the Project team is a girl raised in the Magical world named Tracey Davis. Following the brainstorming session, we ended up alone, and she had some questions about the Vision (she's really interested in electronics and had started studying it before we started this project) Anyway, we talked about the Vision and what makes him more than just a machine and then we got to the future and I basically told her she could do anything she wanted in life.

Then she took my face in her hands and kissed me. Before I could say anything or even try and kiss her back, she grabbed her bag and ran out the door, leaving me there wondering what the heck just happened.

- On the plus side, I didn't repaint the room.

- On the minus side, I have no idea what is going on or what she meant when she kissed me.

- On the other plus side, it was really, really nice.
Now, given that I so misread the whole 'Julie kissing me' thing, I thought I ought to write and ask what just happened? Do I have a new friend that thinks I want to play with her younger brother, or?

Quit laughing Dad. This is hard, and I don't understand girls.

- Harry

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Scabbers the Rat paced back and forth on top of Ronald Weasley's bed.

In the almost two years he had been Ron's pet, he had heard a great deal about Harry Potter... but it wasn't until today that he had actually laid eyes on the boy.

It was like looking at James... And finding Lily staring at him.

Lily's mind was at work there too. James would never have known how long rats live. Harry had planted a thought into Ron's mind, and while the boy himself was far too lazy to look into it, it was only a matter of time before the problem with Scabber's age made it back to his original keeper, and whatever else Percy Weasley might be, he wasn't lazy or stupid.

Percy would want to know why it was his rat had lived so long.

Lupin was in the castle. Black was free and living far to close to the castle for Scabbers' comfort. And Harry was here, noticing things that no one else ever seemed to. What if he...

Scabbers calmed himself. He hadn't survived this long by panicking. It was time to cut his losses and be somewhere, anywhere else. He contemplated just leaving, but there were too many things in this castle that would love to make a meal of a rat... Ron had Herbology in the morning. It wouldn't take much to secret himself in the boy's book bag and wait for the opportunity to make his escape.

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Sirius Black fumbled for his wand while the woman molded herself to him and appeared to be attempting to eat his face. He struggled to recall her name while casually waving his wand at the door. The house's wards recognized its owner and the door swung open. Sirius backed into the room, pulling the extremely affectionate woman, who he believed to be named 'Sandra' along with him.

"Nice place Sam," she mumbled into his mouth.

Now that was insulting. How could a woman, any woman not remember the name of a man as enormously studly as Sirius Black? He was going to have to have words with this 'Cindy'... probably later, but certainly soon.

"Sirius?"

_Oh damn it to hell Moony, _Sirius thought. _Not now._

"Hey wait a minute Stan, I'm not into that sort of thing," Sandy said.

"Don't mind Remus, he was just leaving," Sirius explained.

"He'd better," Stella huffed. "Where's the bog Steve?"

Sirius supplied the woman with directions to the facilities while promising himself that she'd be
screaming his name soon enough. He turned to his oldest friend. "Remus, get the hell out."

"Sirius, Harry hates me," the man blubbered, obviously deep in his cups.

"So do I," Black laughed. "What happened, did you try to cockblock him too?"

"He doesn't like pranks, he thinks I abandoned him when he was younger with no excuse, and he says James isn't his dad."

Sirius helped his friend to his feet and guided him to his room. Laying the extremely drunken werewolf on his bed, Sirius then cast silencing charms on every surface and locked the door behind him. Remus was in a bad way, but there was a horny woman in the house. The Man code was very clear on what he had to do.

Cut his friend loose and get himself some.

"This is a nice place Seymore," Ceclia said when she returned to the room and flowed into his arms. "Is your friend gone?"

"Completely gone," Sirius said smiling his famous panty dropping smile. "Now, where were we?"

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"Remember gentlemen," Susan Richards said as she took her seat at the table. "No business talk, no scientific conjectures, no wild theories, nothing likely to make my eyes glaze over in boredom."

"You're married to a cruel woman Reed," Tony noted as he unfolded his napkin and laid it on his lap.

"She's been married to me for a decade and a half," Mr. Fantastic said with an exaggerated shrug. "I don't think it's too out of line for Sue to want a quiet dinner with a friend where we pay attention to her occasionally."

"Especially when you consider how many of these 'quiet dinners' have been interrupted by the diners needing to rush out and save the world over the years," Sue huffed, while pointedly ignoring Reed's latest Robobutler arriving to serve the salad course. There was just something wrong about a machine bringing the food to your table. If this one ran amok and tried to kill them like the last two had, she and her loving husband would be having words about the capabilities he designed into his robotic domestics.

"So," she continued after the machine had left the table without attempting grievous bodily harm, "How's Harry getting along?"

"Well, over the Christmas vacation he learned a hard lesson about life."

"What happened?" Reed asked.

"He had developed a severe crush on Julie Power, and she kissed him on the cheek when the Power kids were leaving his 11th birthday party," Reed grinned.

"And she had no clue?" Sue asked.

"As far as I can tell, she thought that Harry was around as much as he was because he was Jack's buddy," Tony grinned between bites of his salad. "Harry believed that the kiss meant that they had 'an understanding','
"An understanding?" Reed echoed.

"That poor boy," Sue sighed. "You let him watch too many old movies."

"So, Harry's Christmas shopping with Franklin and Happy, and he's eying this necklace in a jewelry story, playing it cool, asking Franklin if he thought Julie would like it. Franklin realizes what's going on and tells Harry that Julie, who has just turned fifteen, has a boyfriend."

"Ouch." Reed said shaking his head.

"Yeah, so after that Harry was convinced that he'd been dumped. He hid it, you know how he is, but you could tell that something was wrong. I finally got it out of him when I found him trying to hide in his tree house so that he could feel sorry for himself on Christmas day. I tried to explain to him that girls mature faster than boys and that for now the three years between them was just too much of a gap, and that she probably had no clue as to what he was feeling." Tony's grin got even wider. "He was so cute."

Reed laughed while Susan regarded them both with a glare. "You two are enjoying this entirely too much."

"So," Tony continued, trying without much success to hide his amusement at his son's antics, "what is Franklin up to?"

"He's up at Xaviers in Westchester and they think they're making progress toward controlling his abilities. That school has opened his eyes to the world I think. His last letter was full of stories about classmates whose parents rejected them for their mutation. Can you imagine that?" Reed asked. "Ben has been visiting a few times a week to let the children that have... a less than human appearance know that they aren't alone in that."

"And Johnny goes along because he enjoys the way the older girls react to him," Sue said disapprovingly.

"That's Johnny for you," Tony laughed.

The robobutler trundled out of the kitchen with the main courses, and Tony Stark began chiming.

"Sorry," he said pulling a datapad from his jacket pocket. Glancing at the screen his expression brightened. "It's from Harry."

Manipulating a few controls caused the screen to fill with text. Stark's eyes danced over the text and he began to laugh. He passed the datapad to Reed. "That's my boy!"

"He's building a 'magical' computer?" Richards asked. "I'm going to have to get him to let me take a look at that... I'm not sure why he panicked, that's a respectable speed for a first generation device, they can always make upgrades later," then the hero found the part of the message that had amused his friend. "Oh, that poor kid," Reed said with a smile and passed the datapad to his wife.

Sue was silent for a few moments while the two men in the room grinned stupidly at each other, then she read the message. "Tony, if you tease this poor boy, I will hurt you."

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From: "Dear Old Dad" tstark_

To: "Casanova"
Harry -

Good news about your project, you seem to have regrouped from where you were when you called. Don't worry about it, you'll figure it out, I have faith in you.

From the sound of things with your friend Tracey, it sounds to me that when you suggested that she might be able to be and do what she wants to do when she's older, you may well have been the very first to ever tell her that. The kiss might have been a very enthusiastic, if slightly embarrassing way of saying thank you.

Then again, maybe she thinks you're cute and just wanted to kiss you.

There's a reason that women are described as mysteries that no man truly understands.

If you like this girl, then make sure you don't annoy her, don't tease her, don't tell your friends about her specifically, and never, ever, make eye contact with any of her friends, even for a second. Trust me on that one. Don't expect to be allowed to kiss her without express permission, and don't expect her to do it again. Treat her as you've been treating her and try and be as honest with her as you can.

If she does kiss you again, enjoy it.

On the other hand, if you don't like the girl, stay away from her. That will save you both a lot of problems.

That's about it for my advice for dealing with women, for your age group anyway. If you have any specific questions, feel totally free to ask Harry. Your old dad may not have the answer but he knows where to look for assistance.

- Remind me when you get home, we need to update 'the Talk'.
- Love you, Dad.

-===ooo000ooo===-....

"Need any help?"

Hermione looked up from her packing to find Padma leaning in the door frame. "No, I've got it," she said as she folded the last of her jumpers and placed it in her open trunk. "The only things left are my night clothes, what I'm wearing tomorrow, and the decorations in the room."

"Well," Padma continued, "It looks like we're building a very slow computer. We've tried every single medium we could think of, and none of them had any appreciable advantage over sandstone when it came to flow through the rune sets."

"That figures," Hermione shook her head as she gathered her personal photographs from her bedside table and placed them into the trunk, padding each with the clothing already packed away. "Harry wanted something faster so badly, and frankly it would make even the calculator better if we're forced to deliver that."

"Yeah. I thought I'd spend this summer trying to refine the runic logic gates some more, maybe I can get a little more speed out of them." Padma said.
Hermione moved to her chest of drawers. On top of the empty chest was her favorite souvenir, her hand print and personal note from Jennifer Walters. Hefting the heavy sheet of aluminium she carried it to her trunk and recalled when Harry had given it to her back on September first;

_The compartment was silent except for the ambient sounds of the train. "That's my present? A silver square?"

"Hold your horses. Give a guy a chance." Harry lay the square on the palm of his left and covered it with his right hand. He then closed his eyes and appeared to be concentrating.

_After thirty seconds, Hermione couldn't stand it anymore. She had forgotten that she was angry with Harry and just wanted to know what he was up to. "Well?"

"Aluminum is hard. The magic just keeps sliding off of it." Harry complained.

She smiled. Harry was such a goof, claiming the magic kept sliding off... sliding off...

She lost the smile at the memory and looked up at Padma with a shocked expression on her face. "We've got to find Harry, right now."

…-====ooo0000oo0====-…

"Harry!"

The pair of Ravenclaw girls rushed into the Great Hall to find Harry sitting at the Hufflepuff table surrounded by laughing Hufflepuffs.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Aluminium." Hermione gasped.

"Aluminum," Harry corrected.

"Aluminium," Hermione insisted.

"Aluminum," Harry said with a grin.

"Aluminium, you great bloody Yankee git!"

"Ok, ok, what about Aluminium?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Calm down Hermione," Padma said putting her hand on her friend's shoulder. "Harry do you remember what you said about that sheet of Aluminium that Jennifer put her hand print on?"

"Something about magic sliding off of ..." Harry's eyes went wide and he leaned forward to bang his forehead on the table top. "I've been stupid. It was right in front of me and I never saw it."

"We just need to find some to try." Hermione said.

"We've got your souvenir..." Padma suggested.
"No!"

Harry sat up. "Justin!"

"Yeah Harry?" the Muggleborn Hufflepuff called from down the table.

"I just saw you with a can of Lilt?"

"Yeah, sorry Harry, it's my last one. I saved it for tonight."

"I want the can." Harry said.

"Sorry mate, it's my last one."

"Not the soda, the can."

"Oh," Finch-Fletchley said pouring the pineapple and grapefruit flavored liquid into a glass. "Here," he said tossing the now empty can to Harry.

Harry caught the can and headed for the door. "We'll have to clean it, and get the rune sets for the adder etched..." A sudden realization brightened his eyes. "My god, if this works we can photo-etch the rune sets."

"Would that work around magic?" Padma asked.

"It should," Harry answered as the trio exited the Great Hall, "it's a chemical process. Magic shouldn't have any effect on that process at all. How did we miss this?"

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A/N - Why, yes, I did have a little fun with the differing National pronunciations of Al. For those unaware of the pronunciations:

Brit: Al-U-Min-E-Um

US: A-Lum-I-Num
Year Three - Summer

Chapter Summary

- Summer vacation prior to third year. Neville visits and meets some interesting people and does some interesting things. Who knew the sheltered Wizard was a Video Game savant?

The children milled through the crowded train, running from compartment to compartment bidding farewell to their assorted friends and acquaintances, never noticing the fat brown rat that scurried at their feet.

Scabbers had been trying to make his escape for weeks, but for some reason his current keeper had taken a sudden interest in him, ever since Harry Potter had pronounced him lovable. After almost two years of near neglect, this sudden attention had turned out to be more than a little annoying.

Still, all he had needed to do was wait. Predictably Ron Weasley's attention finally wandered and Scabbers managed to escape his deep pocket after the boy had fallen asleep slumped onto the bench of the train car on his way home for the summer.

Now the rat was making his way to a point where he could make his escape as soon as the train slowed to pull into the station. All of his instincts were telling him that something was wrong, but Scabbers ignored his rat instincts while he concentrated his human consciousness on making his escape.

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Kettlingur made her way through the maze of human legs as well, following her prey in a ducked position and with silent movements.

Instincts older than time had her pace her oblivious prey through the car, closing to a distance of twice her own length. The rat's scent rolled about her tongue. There was something off about it, but it was still prey.

Each step was chosen with care, her ears forward and alert, her eyes focused and almost unblinking. The rat stopped at the end of the corridor, waiting for one of the parade of students to open the door between the cars, Kettlingur stopped as well. Experience had taught her than while most humans did not like rats, and would never eat one, they almost universally interfered with her if she caught one.

The servant class was so very hard to understand.

The rat skittered through the doorway following a pair of girls heading forward to the next car while Kettlingur again paused waiting for the next opportunity to do the same and continue her hunt.

Her wait wasn't long, almost instantly a boy made his way through the doorway and Kettlingur darted through the door before it closed. The rat was standing on the edge of the platform, staring intently over the side at the rapidly moving landscape.

Kettlingur settled herself, her ears forward and alert, her eyes unblinking. She dug in with her fore paws, her claws extending unconsciously while her rear legs silently sought out their best grip for the
leap that would end the hunt.

Whatever advantages her kneazle heritage offered were abandoned as her inner tiger took over. This wasn't a situation for judgment and qualification, this was the hunt, this was life.

At the suitable moment, her inner tiger commanded that she leap from the rat's blind spot and make her kill. She would crush the prey's throat with a single bite, while her right fore paw would shred the rat's hindquarters to prevent escape if the bite wasn't immediately fatal.

Kettlingur was in mid leap when the door to the carriage opened once again. The rat reacted to the opening of the door by spinning to face the doorway, just as the part kneazle made her bite.

Instead of slashing open the rat's hindquarters her right fore paw slammed the rat's head to the metal platform hard enough to send the creature into unconsciousness, while ripping open the rodent's face to the bone and crushing its lower jaw. Rather than the soft tissue of the rat's neck, her jaws closed on the rat's hind legs.

The portion of her mind that calculated such things reflected that a kill was a kill, and as the rat's blood flooded her mouth, she shook her head back and forth in an instinctual way that would have snapped the rat's neck if her attack had been as planned.

It was only thing that Kettlingur learned just who had opened the door and spoiled her perfect kill.

"Kettlingur! No!" the cat/kneazle mix heard as she was lifted from the platform by her servant girl. "No! Bad Kitty. Drop it! Drop it!"

Shocked by the rudeness of her servant's sudden lifting her, Kettlingur opened her mouth to protest the outrage of how she was being treated and the rat fell away from her, bouncing off the platform and falling onto the speeding railbed below.

Kettlingur meowed in protest while glaring at the servant who had cost her a kill. True she wasn't hungry, but it was the principle of the thing.

Millie Bulstrode sighed while scratching her cat behind its ears and reentered the carriage to return to the compartment she shared with her cousins and Draco Malfoy while idly wondering just how a rat came to be running loose on the Express.

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Padma raised an eyebrow at the smug look on Hermione's face. "Are you going to gloat all the way home?"

"Maybe."

"Oh god," Harry said looking to the roof of the rail carriage. "Not this again."

"Quiet Number Five," Hermione grinned. "The smart kids are talking."

"The smart kids are talking," Harry mimicked as he returned to his magazine. "Lets see the smart kids gyro stabilize an inertial platform." He muttered from behind the safety of the paper shield.

"I don't recall gloating quite this much last June when I was first in the class," Padma sniffed.

"Well I remember quite clearly someone dancing around the compartment for the first hour of the trip," Hannah pointed out.
"So do I," Sue added joining in on the fun. "I also recall thinking that your constant requests for 'high fives' was a bit excessive. And Hermione," she said with a grin, "calling Harry 'Number Five' is a bit unfair, it isn't his fault he's the slow Ravenclaw."

Harry lowered his magazine once again and offered Susan a gimlet eye. "That's One Bones. Being fifth in a class of fifty is nothing to be ashamed of."

"One what Harry?" Susan asked sweetly.

"One strike," Harry explained. "After you get three strikes, you're on my list."

"Sue makes a snarky comment and gets a strike while Hermione and Padma abuse you all year long? That hardly seems fair." Hannah asked stirring the pot.

"Those two are sitting at 2.98 strikes right now, and have been for a while," Harry pointed out.

"So," Susan asked, "what happens when you're on the list?"

"You don't," Harry said with finality, "want to be on the list. Trust me on this one."

There was a short pause while the four girls blinked at him owlishly, then Hermione started to giggle. She was soon joined by the other three and it wasn't long until they were all laughing at Harry.

"You've got them terrified into hysterical laughter mate," Neville said from his side of the carriage where he was trying mightily not to get any of Harry's troubles on him.

"Number Five is alive!" Hermione snarked.

Harry raised his magazine again while trying not to listen to Hannah who got the joke start laughing even harder, and to Hermione as she tried to explain the reference of her joke to the purebloods in the compartment.

He really needed some dumber friends. It was going to be a long train ride.

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The change from the air conditioned quinjet to the inferno of the airport was quite a shock after spending ten months in Scotland. Harry squinted in the bright sunlight, wishing mightily that he had thought to have brought some sunglasses.

"Welcome to Wakanda Mr. Stark," the tall man at the foot of the airstairs called out.

"Thank you M'Kona," Tony said shaking the man's hands. "This is my son Harry."

"And welcome to you as well young Harry," M'Kona said. "I have arranged some entertainment for you while your father and I attend the conference."

"Thank you sir," Harry said, "I appreciate that, but no one needs to make a fuss, I've got homework to do from school."

"My King did say you were something of a scholar Harry," the big man laughed. "But he also noted that you had a talent for finding mischief."

Harry wasn't sure if he had just been insulted, but he was very certain that the next time the King of Wakanda paid the Stark home a visit, he was going to find his bed short sheeted. While Harry didn't think much of pranking, some challenges just couldn't go unanswered.
T'Challa should have known better than that.

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Draco stepped from the floo and stepped to one side cleaning his robes in an automatic reflex. After only a few seconds his mother appeared brushing herself clean in exactly the same way. Draco took a deep breath and sighed. It was good to be home.

"How is father?" he asked now that they were home and safe from prying eyes. A Malfoy learned early that discussions about family were never had in public.

"Lucius is better. The time we spent together at Christmas helped enormously. He is out now, attending to business, but will be home in time for dinner."

"Good," Draco said as a sense of relief washed over him.

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After an evening out to celebrate Hermione's end of year scores, the Grangers had returned to their home to unwind in front of the telly before they retired for the night.

Stuart was in 'his chair', a leather recliner watching the Nine O Clock News on the BBC, while Kristine and her daughter were cuddled together on the sofa, each with a book and a cup of tea.

This was, Hermione reflected, the part of her life at home that she missed the most. She sighed to herself, turned the page, and lay her head on her mother's shoulder.

"Oh, how horrible," Kristine said, while Stuart grunted in agreement.

Hermione diverted her attention from her book to the television. On the screen was a young blond woman.

"We were hiking along the old Ghost Line trail near Wakefield," the young woman was saying, "when we just came upon him laying on the side of the trail."

"There was blood everywhere!" her male companion added. "The poor old sod looked like he had been half eaten by a bear or a woodchipper or some thing."

The image on the screen shifted to the Newsreader. "Authorities are reporting that the unidentified man had been found along side little used hiking trail approximately five miles outside of Wakefield. The man was airlifted to Pinderfield Hospital in Wakefield, reportedly suffering from severe animal attack."

Again the screen shifted to a uniformed police Inspector. "The victim was seemingly savaged by some sort of beast, though just what it was that did this too him is as yet unknown. There aren't many animals capable of doing that sort of damage to a man, and none of them are native to Britain, so we may be dealing with an escaped exotic pet, or possibly even a zoo animal, though none of the local zoos have reported any missing large predators."

From off screen the reporter asked, "Has anyone determined just how he came to be out there? If not for the hikers, he might well have been there for months."

"If not longer," the Inspector agreed, "and no, we've got no idea of just how he came to be out there. That is one of the things we're going to be asking him when he wakes up."
"I've heard from some of the rescuers," the reporter asked, "that there appeared to be evidence that on top of his other injuries, the man appeared to have, well, fallen from a train."

"Since there has never been a railway in that area, that of course is impossible," the Inspector said with finality, seeming to hesitate before continuing. "There was evidence that he seemed to have fallen from some height, and that he rolled along the trail at some speed before coming to rest where he was found, but there was no train."

"The locals call that particular bit of trail the 'Ghost Line'..."

"I know what they call it," the Inspector snapped. "There was no train."

The screen returned to the Newsreader. "A rather forceful statement on the part of the Police. What was being referred to is a local legend of frequent reports of an antique train pulled by a steam engine along that trail. As there has never been a rail line in that area, the reports are generally filed and forgotten, but the reports persist. There is no doubt that the unnamed victim found along the Ghost Line trail will be asked several questions by the authorities as soon as he regains consciousness."

Kristine Granger had gone back to her book, and Stuart's attention was absorbed by the next story, but Hermione's focus was on the 'Ghost train'. Near Wakefield? She tried to picture the most likely route of the Hogwarts Express... Could the Express be what people were seeing and hearing? Perhaps the Muggle repelling charms on that area of the track were in need of maintenance...

Hermione pondered writing a letter to Professor Flitwick reporting the incident before abandoning the thought. She was just being silly. Surely the Ministry of Magic routinely monitored such things. Besides, how could the Hogwarts Express possibly be tied to a man mauled by a large animal?

Laughing at herself, Hermione cuddled into her mother's side again. It was good to be home.

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"What did you think of the processing facility at the Vibranium mine?" Tony asked as he began his salad.

"That place is seriously cool," Harry enthused. "The tunnels seem to go on forever, and the raw ore... just amazing. You can just feel the potential energy in it."

"I don't think I've ever heard the Sacred Mound being called 'Cool' before," T'Challa said with a grin. "I've heard that you've been speaking to some of my engineers about processor design."

Harry nodded. His favorite part of this trip, so far, were the evening meals with his dad and T'Challa. You never knew where the conversation was going to go, but it was almost always interesting. Usually these get togethers were formal functions, but tonight was more of a quiet family thing. "We're trying to build a basic processor as part of a school project, so I thought that I might get a few opinions."

"The very idea of a computer that works on magic is intriguing," the king continued, "as is your decision to use Aluminum as your base material. I would like to see what you finally come up with."

"This project has been a real learning experience for Harry so far," Tony interjected. "It seems that hardly a day goes by that Harry hasn't either been in a panic that he might have bitten off more than he can chew, or in euphoria when he makes a discovery of some kind."

"You're just jealous that I won't let you help." Harry groused as the main course was served.
"Harry has a point Tony," T'Challa said with a grin. "Don't forget I was at the infamous Raingutter Regatta and I witnessed the disgraceful display you and Reed put on."

"Ha!" Harry interjected. "I told you it wasn't just Franklin and me who saw what you two were doing."

"Abuse," Tony noted, "is all I get anymore."

"Ramonda was particularly impressed with your methodology," T'Challa said, before starting his own main course. "She is rather hard to get a compliment out of, so I'm doubly impressed."

That comment confused Harry a bit. "Ms. Ramonda seemed really nice to me. She had quite a few helpful suggestions that I think I'm going to be able to use. She also suggested that I try using Vibranium for my base medium over aluminum, but the budget my team and I put together for this project would never cover something like that."

"Yes," T'Challa nodded. "She mentioned that to me and made a suggestion of her own. As a consequence, when you head back home, there will be a fifty square meter roll of sheet Vibranium in your cargo hold, specifically donated by the government of Wakanda for your use."

Vibranium was one of the rarest metals in the world, and as a consequence, one of the most expensive. Harry was so shocked at the generosity of the gift, easily worth millions if not tens of millions, he sat back in his chair for a moment with his mouth open. "Thank you sir, but that's... I can't..."

"Yes you can Harry," T'Challa said with a wave of his hand. "It is vitally important to me that you accept this gift, even if it turns out to be of no use to your school project. Do this thing for me."

Harry blinked. "Thank you, but I don't understand."

"The reasons are quite simple really," T'Challa said with a shrug. "Ramonda is more than just the chief engineer of the Sacred Mound Facility, she is also my father's widow, my step mother. The King smiled, "amongst Wakandans she is known as the Queen Mother. If you accept this gift from her, Ramonda will be happy, and when Ramonda is happy, my life is so much easier."

That was when Harry decided not to short sheet T'Challa's bed.

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"Attend me girl," The old man in the bed gasped. She nervously approached the bed. The old man had never seemed so... small, so... weak. He lay on the bed covered with layers of blankets in spite of the heat of the day, a beaker of some foaming potion slowly dripping onto a gauze mask that covered his face.

What this was impending death looked like?

She steeled herself against the smells and the fluids that the old man produced. She would not show the revulsion his appearance inspired in her. Whatever his faults, this man was her Grandfather. She would show her respect.

"Tell me of your progress with the Potter heir."

"The work on our project has begun," she said quietly, reaching out to take his shaking hand in an attempt to calm the man. "He and I have spent a fair amount of time together in research and
planning for what must happen for us to be successful, though this is almost always in the company of others on the project group. I believe he considers me to be a friend."

"You must..." the old man descended into a coughing fit. A pair of healers rushed to his side only to be waved away by the patriarch. "You must bind him to us. We need the vitality of a new bloodline. We... I do not have much time."

"Grandfather," she said quietly, "It will be years before any such pairing would be allowed. The Potter heir would need to be sixteen for such a bonding to be made. You know that, you sat in the family seat when that change was made to the law. You voted against it, but the change still passed."

"How soon?" the old man asked.

"At least three years Grandfather. Under mother's guidance, I have laid the groundwork for a bonding, but we cannot move forward until he is of age." and we will not unless I love him, she did not add.

"Despite your mother's heritage, you are our heir. Twenty seven generations of your... our ancestors have set forth the traditions by which you will live your life," her grandfather said, turning his hand to take hers with amazing strength. "The Potter boy is young, you will guide him away from his own family's traditions to our superior ways. This is my command to you as my heir."

"As you command, so I will obey," she said, not feeling the slightest bit of remorse for lying to a dying man. "I will bind him to our family." Or perhaps herself to his.

"Good," the old man whispered, his grip on her hand falling away. She stepped back from the bed and she was replaced by the healers.

She took one of the healers by the arm and pulled him to the corner by the door. "How is he? I am his heir, I need to know."

The man looked between his patient and the girl, and seemed to make a decision. "This attack will be devastating, but he will survive. However his time is short, he has two years perhaps three baring a major break through." The healer turned from her and moved to the old man's bedside.

She paused for a moment taking in the scene, and then she hung her head and was surprised by the tears that started flowing down her cheeks. Was she crying for the old man, or for the life that he could have shared with her if he hadn't been such an old fool?

She wasn't sure. She didn't know if she ever would be.

Wiping her eyes, she squared her shoulders and left her Grandfather's bedchamber. No doubt the vultures would be gathering.

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"You," Susan said for perhaps the tenth time, "are so lucky!"

"Susan Amelia!" Susan's aunt said in a bemused fashion, "A little decorum if you please?"

Neville realized that he could almost hear himself sweat. "I don't feel lucky. Are you sure these things are safe?" he asked as the stared out the plate glass windows at the huge metal beasts on the wide roadways.
"You'll be fine Neville," Hannah said dismissively. "Just think about it, New York. All that shopping."

"And the restaurants," Susan chimed in. In truth, the pair hadn't really known anything about New York City, but the envy they felt over Neville's opportunity had inspired them to learn all they could about the great Muggle city.

"Yay," Neville responded with a complete lack of enthusiasm.

Amelia Bones smiled to herself as she watched the girls tease Longbottom boy into a minor panic. Suddenly she was enjoying the favor she was doing for Augusta Longbottom.

When she had first learned of her niece's association with the Stark boy she had started to worry. Then there was the report of an aspect of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named possessing a Hogwarts professor only to be dispatched by Agatha Harkness of all people, with the Potter boy being somehow involved.

When the ill advised attempt by Albus Dumbledore and Cornelius Fudge to set aside the boy's adoption brought the Odinson into the Ministry promising death and destruction, had proved to Amelia that she had not been worrying needlessly. If anything Susan and Hannah had become even more closely involved with the boy over that summer when they would gather at the home of that Muggle born girl Granger to speak with young Harry over the telephone.

Now during their second year a pocket diary containing an aspect of the fallen Dark Lord had surfaced at the school, again seemingly focused on the boy. The mere existence of that little book had the Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries terrified. Amelia didn't believe in coincidences. The Potter boy's reappearance in Magical Britain with a new name had seemingly hauled He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named from the shadows.

And Susan was aligning herself with the boy. In a few years it was conceivable that Amelia would be watching her niece climb onto one of those huge flying things heading off the visit this Harry Stark. Two years of school, two appearances of the Dark Lord, she mused to her self.

"Mr. Longbottom?" the Ministry man who worked at the Airport giving assistance to magicals who chose to travel in the Muggle way. "Your aircraft has arrived. They're waiting for you."

Amelia smiled at Neville's embarrassment caused by the hugs the two girls gave him, and she shook his hand when he came to her.

"Have a good time Neville."

"I will Madam Bones. Thank you for coming with me today."

With a small shy wave the frightened boy proved that the Sorting Hat had known what it was doing when it sorted him into Gryffindor, and he followed the Ministry Functionary through the security checkpoint.

They were all good children, Amelia said to herself. Neville, Susan, Hannah, the Granger girl, the Patil girl and even Harry Stark, all of them. Still two appearances of the Dark Lord in only two years...

Amelia joined the two girls at the window where they watched as Neville boarded the white flying machine. It was shaped oddly when compared to the others around it, shorter, with stubby wings and a large glass window across the upper third of the body. As soon as Neville had disappeared inside the large machine, the door sealed and an awful noise filled the air, invading even the terminal...
building. As if to point out just how different this machine was from its fellows, it rose straight into the air rather than rolling out onto the long roadways. The machine then oriented itself pointing away from the terminal building and angling upward, it vanished in an unimaginable burst of speed.

Yes, Amelia thought as she observed the continuing envy on the faces of Susan and Hannah, there would be a Auror at Hogwarts next year, no matter what Dumbledore thought about it.

"And this is my room," Harry said as he led Neville in. "There's an extra bed if you want to bunk in here with me, or your own room across the hall."

Neville was slightly surprised that Harry had only a room rather than the suite that he had back at Longbottom Hall, still the house was nice. "In here I think. Truth be told, it's odd waking up as the only one in a room after spending most of the year in the dorms."

Harry shrugged. "We've got private rooms in Ravenclaw. I wonder why its different."

"Private rooms?" Neville echoed. "I don't know if I would like that too much. When I'm on my own for too long, I sort of get inside my own head, you know? I end up second guessing every choice I've made and working myself into a bit of a..." Neville seemed surprised at himself for what he was admitting. "Listen to me. Yeah, I'll stay in here if that's ok. So what's on the agenda?"

Harry was interrupted before he could answer by a knock at his door.

"Dinner will be in an hour," Edwin Jarvis said from the doorway. "Then perhaps a quiet evening until the pair of you are ready to get some sleep to get through the time zone differences."

"Thanks Jarvis," Harry said happily. "Jarvis, this is Neville Longbottom, a friend from school. He's staying with us for two weeks. Neville, this is Jarvis, he's our family retainer."

"Good afternoon Neville," Jarvis said with a smile. "Retainer is just Harry's way of saying I'm the butler."

"Butler?" Neville asked puzzled. "I don't know that word."

"A butler is a domestic servant," Harry began.

"Hardly," Jarvis sniffed. "A butler is responsible for the household, and for the management of the household staff. Domestic servant indeed!"

Neville paled. "You keep human slaves?"

"What?" Harry asked incredulously. "No, not slaves, employees."

"The Stark family pays very well," Jarvis confirmed as he lifted Harry's trunk and placed it on a small table. He then opened the luggage and began sorting through the clothing. After a few moments he stopped and turned to Harry with a gimlet eye. "That school of yours does have a laundry service, does it not?"

"Sorry," Harry grinned, "the last week at school got kind of hectic, and I only wore tee shirts and shorts in Wakanda."

"From the look of things, a single set of shorts and tee shirt. Make sure you sort your dirty things," Jarvis sighed. "We don't want a repeat of the pink underthings from last summer."
“Ok Jarvis,” Harry reached into his trunk and pulled out an armload of dirty clothing. "Come on Nev, I'll show you how we do laundry without magic or elves."

Neville followed Harry from the room, shaking his head at the strangeness of this way of life. No elves, no magic and servants you paid? How very odd.

"Thank you for the ride Mr. Hogan,” Neville said as he moved to get out of the car at the corner of 42nd street and Madison avenue.

"Call me Happy, Neville." Happy said as he lowered the passenger side window. "You start talking about Mr. Hogan and I start looking around for my old man. When you're ready to head home, you two give me a call."

"Thank Happy," Harry answered before turning to Neville. "Well, this is it, the Baxter Building."

Neville googled as he looked up, "How tall is this place?"

"35 Stories," Harry said. "Franklin and his family live on the 33rd."

"Please tell me they have an elevator like the Ministry."

"They do," Harry laughed. "If they didn't Franklin would be visiting me a whole lot more than I visited him."

The pair entered the lobby of the building, the uniformed doorman nodding to Harry in recognition. Neville moved to push the up button for the bank of elevators.

"Not that one Nev, the one we want is back here," Harry led his friend to the far corner of the lobby where a silver disk was implanted in the wall. Harry placed his left hand over the disk and a hidden elevator door opened.

"That's a big button," Neville commented as he pondered just how many things in the Muggle world seemed to require the use of buttons.

"It's a palm reader. It scans your hand and opens the door if you're on the access list," Harry explained as he pushed the button for the 30th floor. "It's a lot better than the old system, that had an electronic sensor that read a light pattern from, believe it or not, an emitter you kept in your belt buckle."

"That sounds weird," Neville said as he braced himself in the corner at the surge of upward motion. "This thing is fast!"

"Yeah, Franklin's dad tends to over do things," Harry gestured toward the rapidly moving lights. "At least we aren't in here for too long."

The door opened and the pair exited the elevator to find a pretty blonde woman sitting behind an ornate oak desk.

"Good morning, welcome to the Baxter Building Harry Stark." she said.

"Good morning Roberta," Harry said. "Harry Stark and Neville Longbottom to visit Franklin."

"Ah, yes," she said in clipped concise tones. "Neville Longbottom, an English wand wizard. Welcome to the Baxter Building. Franklin is on his way."
Neville couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was something... off about the woman. Perhaps it was the way she looked at him through her large round glasses, without ever blinking.

"Harry!" Neville turned to find a blond haired boy approximately his age come barrelling through the doorway behind the receptionist.

"Hey Franklin, this is Neville."

"Hey Nev," Franklin Richards said shaking the other's hand. "Harry's told me all about you. Thanks for coming over. You've got to tell me what this idiot gets up to over in England."

"Scotland actually," Neville corrected. "Our school is in Scotland."

"Oh. Sorry," Franklin said as he lead the other's to the door. "So you're Scotch?"

"Scotch is a drink," Neville explained. "The people of Scotland are Scots, but I'm English, from England. I just go to school in Scotland." His attention drifted back the receptionist as they passed through the doorway. Neville stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes wide in horror. "Bloody hell!"

Harry stopped to see what had upset his friend. Roberta the Receptionist turned to see what might be bothering the visitor to the Baxter Building, swiveling on her mounts as she did so.

"Sorry Nev," Harry said placing his hand on Neville's shoulder. "I forgot to tell you, Roberta's not a human, she's a robot."

"Robot?" Neville asked trying to process through the horror of seeing half a woman bolted to the floor on swivels.

"A machine," Franklin said attempting to calm his visitor. How could someone not know about robots he wondered.

"Thank you for your concern Neville Longbottom," the receptionist said with her cool clipped tones, "but it is unnecessary. I am not an organic entity. The appearance of my upper body is designed to put visitors at ease."

"Thanks Roberta," Franklin said as he guided the stunned Neville through the door and into his home.

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Neville watched as a very pretty blond woman wrapped Harry in a hug. "Harry, it's good to see you. It's been so quiet around here without you and Franklin doing your experiments."

"We didn't blow that many things up," Harry protested. "This is a friend from school, Neville Longbottom. Neville, this is Mrs. Richards."

"Hello Neville," the woman said taking his hand in hers. "Welcome to the Baxter Building... Is there something wrong?"

"Are you... Real?" Neville asked hesitantly, feeling the warmth of her hand.

"I assume someone," she shot her son a dirty look, "forgot to tell you about Roberta? I've been after my husband to give her a lower torso just to prevent her from frightening people. Yes Neville, I'm human."

A howl rent the air, followed by a loud crash and then a WOOSH! as a oblong ball of flame came
around the corner and flew through an open doorway to exit. Neville could have sworn that he heard the sound of... laughter coming from the fire. He shot a glance at Harry and was somewhat consoled by the wide grin on his friend's face.

If Harry was amused, it couldn't be that bad... could it?

A series of thundering building shaking crashes came from the direction that the fireball had appeared. For the third time in as many minutes Neville was shocked speechless when a large orange... something appeared screaming in fury. "Where is he?" the orange... thing bellowed. "I'll murderize him!"

Harry and Franklin had fallen to the floor in laughter, and if he hadn't been quite so terrified by the sight Neville might well have joined them. Now that he could see it better he could see that the huge orange... thing was basically man shaped, but larger than any man Neville had ever seen other than Hagrid. It appeared to be made of orange stones, fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle. It wore what appeared to be blue swim trunks and oddly fuzzy white bunny ears.

Mrs Richards stood in front of the... thing with her hands on her hips. "What am I going to do with you two? Can't we have a visitor without the pair of you acting like bigger children than Franklin and Harry?"

"Visitor?" the creature rumbled, looking about until it locked eyes with Neville. "Ah, sorry kid. It's just that Johnny superglued these ears to my head, and stuck a powder puff tail on my butt." The huge orange thing turned to display the white puffball at the base of where a person's spine would be.

"He got you good this time Ben," Harry laughed.

"Well," the big thing... Ben rumbled. "he's going to be got, I promise you that."

"Jeeze Uncle Ben," Franklin giggled. "Why do you keep falling for Uncle Johnny's tricks?"

"Are you," Neville asked, interrupting whatever Ben was going to say in response to Franklin's question, "a robot?"

A look of confusion crossed the oddly expressive stone work face of the Ben thing. He knelt down directly in front of Neville. "A robot? Nah kid, I'm the real deal, the genuine article."

Ben paused and realized that the boy didn't seem to understand, so he continued. "I'm the everlovin' blue eyed Thing." Still no understanding from the boy. "Ben Grimm, the idol of millions?"

A whoosh again filled the room. The Fireball had returned. came to a stop in midair between Franklin's mother and the... Thing. That was when Neville realized that the fireball was in the shape of a man... Startled he took a step back. Fiendfire?

Moving faster than anything his size should be able to, the Thing's arm shot out and wrapped a huge four fingered hand around the chest of the fire man. "Now that ain't right Hotshot!" he said shaking the fire man vigorously. "Ya scared the kid. Now I've got to put you out."

The shaking evidently did the trick because the flame faded leaving a blond man dressed in a blue body suit in the big thing's hand. The blond man was thrust into Neville's face.

"Apologize for scarin' the kid." Ben rumbled.

"Ah, yeah." the blond man, who looked quite a bit like Franklin. said. "Sorry about that."
"Now," Ben said coldly as he turned his captive so that the two of them were face to face. "The Ears. I want them gone."

"Ok, ok, sheesh, what a grump," Johnny said as he ignited his right hand and burned away the bunny ears and the adhesive used to attach them.

"And the tail."

"Yeah, yeah." Johnny said as he started burning off the powder puff. "Can't say I care for the view back here."

Neville watched all this with wide eyes. What were these... people? "Are you golems?" he asked quietly.

Johnny and Ben exchanged looks of confusion. "Susie, what are we paying that publicist for if there is an English speaking kid who doesn't recognize the Fantastic Four?" Johnny asked.

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The machine men just kept coming. Harry hit the thumb switch to select the grenade option and popped a frag round into the midst of a group of seven. The detonation rendered them to so much scrap, freeing him to look for others.

His ammo was low. A quick glance showed that Franklin was in a similar state. Harry popped a healthpack, and took aim at the flier that had just started it's run, only to see it burst into flames before he could pull the trigger.

Harry tried to calm himself as he picked off another robot before it could fire its weapon at him. Suddenly another popped up from behind a pile of boxes, Harry moved to defend himself only to discover his weapon was empty. Franklin was down and wouldn't be able to help, and Neville... Harry struggled to reload as the robot fired...

Neville fought on alone.

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"I'm not talking to you," the taller of the three, the Muggle said. "'Lets take Nev to the arcade,' you said. 'He's never been,' you said."

"Well, I haven't," the fatty said, a wizard associating with a Muggle. What was the world coming to?

"How was I supposed to know Nev would turn out to be a natural at the Terminator game?" the dark haired wizard asked. "It's not my fault he busted your high score."

"Shattered your high score," Fatty said.

"Probably used magic," the Muggle groused.

Waiting in the alleyway, Shadrack Pritchard eyed his targets as they approached. He had been trolling the arcade for targets and had been surprised to find these three together.

Shadrack was what the Department of Magic called a 'Hill Wizard', he came from a family that rejected the Government and it's cultural teaching. Born in Appalachia and educated at home to distrust cities and the laws of man, Pritchard had abandoned his family's farm at the age of nineteen after his father's death and an argument with his elder brother.
It took him all of a week to rob his first victim, using the befuddlement charm that his granny had taught him to make his victim forget that anything had happened. Now he was living fairly large, only needing to do his work two or three nights a week.

Shadrack wasn't a greedy man, he didn't need to steal from the very rich. That would be noticed he knew. And robbing the very poor make little sense at all. No, he concentrated on the city's idle children. He would check out the popular hangouts of teenagers with money and relieve a few of their excess cash.

But this trio... Two wizards were out with a Muggle? What was that about. A pair of unexcorted wizards would be a real prize. Their wands were worth a pretty penny all by themselves, any other magical items they carried would be worth his time as well. His father had always insisted that he cast the detector for magicals whenever he entered a room intending to check for rivals.

The old man had no idea just how profitable his advice had turned out for his son.

After he determined the trio's intended direction, he jumped ahead with a crack, reappearing in the alley further along the street, he lay in wait for the trio.

They appeared right on Pritchard's schedule, the blonde Muggle and the dark haired wizard still whining about their silly game. Pritchard's wand twitched in his hand and the two wizards were bound in thick ropes, and with another word, the all three of the boys were summoned into the darkness of the alley.

Pritchard wrapped his arm around the neck of the Muggle, pushing his wand into the boy's cheek. There was just something special about the terror that he was going to inspire in these soft children.

Peter Parker arced through the air, the warm air flowing through the permeable membrane of his mask. Approaching the building he twisted in the air so that he would come into contact with the brick with his fingertips and toes. Sure of his purchase, he began his rapid climb up the side of the sky scraper looking to get a little altitude prior to launching himself through the air again.

No one else ever considered what a kick in the head leaping and swinging from building to building could be. It was probably the same for fliers, but there were a lot of fliers. There was only one webslinger. Sometimes it was all he could do not to shout out his joy at the apex of each leap, of each swing. Sure he had the hottest of red headed hotties in Mary Jane, but being Peter Parker sucked with annoying regularity. Being Spiderman on the other hand, was almost always the coolest thing in the world... assuming one overlooked how often someone was trying to kill him, or the police looking to arrest him, or J Jonah Jamison was just being a pain or the times the MJ was mad at him for the risks he took, or if...

Ok, so maybe being Spiderman also sucked with alarming regularity as well, but still, webslinging was a major kick in the head.

Yeah.

Just as Peter realized that he had just managed to depress himself, he got just the faintest tingle of danger as he passed over an alley between two of the shorter buildings. Deciding that busting a few heads would likely be good therapy for his case of the blues, the hero backflipped into the alley, coming to light on the southern most building just above the second story.

There they were. A hood with his arm around the neck of a young boy, while threatening two others
who each appeared to be tied up in a single coil of rope.

Perfect. Kids that age always did the hero worship thing after he busted up the bad guys. That was always good for the ego. Pressing his middle and index fingers to the sensor in the palm of his left glove, Peter activated his wrist mounted web shooter. He quickly established anchor points on both of the buildings that formed the alley, and silently lowered himself behind the thug.

Peter eased himself down until he was hanging directly behind the mugger who appeared to have some kind of medieval bondage fetish. As he arrived the mook was saying something about the boy in his arms being a 'muggle'. Was that some sort of new slang for a mugging victim? Why did he have to be the one to find all the weirdos? This sort of thing probably never happened to Daredevil.

"I'll tell you what," Peter said where he judged the thug's ear might be under the man's cloak. "Let the boys go, and I won't hurt you. Not too much anyway."

"Here's what's going to happen boys," the cloaked man said, pressing his wand firmly into Franklin's neck. "I'm going to deal with your Muggle friend here so that he can't talk to the Aurors for a while. If you cooperate, I'll let him live. If not..."

"You have no idea who you're dealing with," Harry said from the ground as he fought against the binding spell. The bad guy hadn't seen Franklin's hand signal, either that or had ignored it, believing it to be little more than the twitching of a panicked youngster.

Harry, on the other hand, had seen the signal, and remembered it quite well from when he and Franklin had run with the Power Pack. Tattletale was about to go all psi on the bad guy. Harry grinned, he had missed this, missed the adventure of wearing a mask. No masks tonight, but someone was about to get his butt rather severely kicked. Harry glanced to Neville wishing he could warn his friend about what was about to happen, and when he did he saw Neville's eyes go wide in surprise and alarm.

He quickly followed the direction of Neville's gaze to find a figure in a familiar red and blue costume hanging upside down from a single strand of webbing directly behind the wizard that had attacked them. Harry grin spread into a full smile. They were going to have a team up! This was turning out great!

Pritchard was shocked when the words "Let the boys go, and I won't hurt you. Not too much anyway." were spoken next to his right ear.

With his wand out of position to respond, the former hill farmer reacted with all the savagery that he was capable of and blindly swung his right arm, his blow connecting when his fist struck the man behind him square in the face. Pritchard released the Muggle boy and spun to face the other man.

To say that he was shocked to find the other man was dressed from head to toe in a red and blue body stocking and was hanging upside down from a gossamer strand would be something of an understatement.

"You," the masked man said, "hit me in the face."

Pritchard raised his wand to a defensive position. What was this? Some sort of unholy hybrid of a man and an acromantula?
"No, no, no." the man spider said, plucking Pritchard's wand from his hand faster than the wizard could blink, snapping the wand between his gloved fingers and tossing the sparkling residue away. "You hit me in the face, you don't get to poke me with your stick on top of that. I'm tired of this."
The masked being dropped from his webbing, executing a flip that had him standing upright almost before Pritchard realized he had done it. "I'm tired of all the disrespect. I know that the Xmen are the heroes that everyone loves to fear and hate these days, but that was my gig before anyone ever heard of mutants. I'm Spiderman damn it. I've got the proportional strength of a spider, I have webbing, I have major league bad guys, Doc Ock, Electro, Rhino, Venom, Carnage, the Scorpion, all of them claim to be my archenemies. Doctor Freaking Doom himself told me I was going to rue the day! And believe me, I rued that day, yes I did. I've gone toe to toe with Namor and the Hulk. They both handed me my spandexed butt, but I still fought them, and you. You're just a normal guy with a polished stick, and you hit me in the face." Peter moved until he was mask covered nose to nose with the thug.

"You know what?" The Spiderman asked rhetorically, "you've made me mad."

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Stepping away from the mass of webbing that was holding the now naked man to the wall, Spiderman pulled a pair of webbing cartridges from his belt and pulled down the cuffs of his gloves so that he might reload his web shooters.

Harry regarded the bound wizard with a critical eye. Spiderman may have used just a bit too much of his webbing to hold the man to the wall, and stripping him naked 'just to be sure' pretty much guaranteed that every hair on the villain's body was going to be yanked out by the roots if the authorities didn't wait for the webbing to dissolve...

How long did Spiderman's webbing last anyway? It must not be too long, otherwise the taller buildings would be covered with the stuff.

"Thanks for the help Spidey," Franklin said. "We had it covered and were about to mess him up, but thanks."

"Franklin Richards?" Peter asked incredulously realizing for the first time just who the crazy man with the stick had been holding. "Oh, god, please don't tell your uncle Johnny that this guy popped me in the nose, please? Or Ben, please don't tell Ben."

"They won't hear it from us," Harry promised.

"Harry Stark? Eight million people in New York and I run into you two getting mugged? Please Harry, you can tell your dad, but please, I'm begging you, don't tell the Shellhead, he already thinks I'm an idiot."

"Don't worry Spidey," Franklin assured the hero, "we won't rat you out."

"Ok," the masked man said, the relief he was feeling evident to all three of the boys. "Oops, sirens. I've gotta go."

"You're not waiting for the police?" Harry asked.

"Are you wanted again? What for this time?" Franklin added.

"I think they think I robbed Wilson Fisk again, or maybe killed someone..." Spiderman seemed to think for a moment. "Then again, maybe they're just doing it out of habit, I know I've kind of lost track myself." With a two handed gesture that was followed by a 'thwip!' sound, he shot a pair of
weblines up into the night sky. "See you later kids, stay in school!"

Harry watched as the hero vanished among the tall buildings. Then he remembered Neville. The poor guy was probably traumatized beyond all belief. He turned to find his friend still staring up into the night sky his eyes wide and mouth open.

"Nev?" Harry asked quietly.

"This," Neville said his eyes wide and shining in the darkness of the alleyway, "has been the single coolest day in my entire life."

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The next morning Neville woke to find himself alone in the room he was sharing with Harry. That was unusual, normally he was the first one awake in the morning. The Scion of House Longbottom rose from his bed and made his way to the bath to deal with his morning ablutions.

Once that was done, he dressed for the day and made his way to the kitchen.

"Good Morning Master Longbottom," Edwin Jarvis said from where he stood in front of the cooker. "Scrambled eggs this morning?"

"Yes please," Neville answered, still trying to figure out the idea of human servants. Why would a man want to do the work of an elf? How did the elves deal with that? He knew from experience that elves could be highly territorial over their work assignments. "Have you seen Harry this morning?"

"Harry made himself a sandwich and went to work on his school project," Jarvis answered as he busied himself with the preparation of Neville's breakfast. "You'll find him in the basement, he has set up a workshop down there."

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Neville entered Harry's workshop carrying a cup of tea and found his friend bent over his workbench.

"Morning Harry," Neville said. "What are you working on?"

"Morning Nev," Harry answered without looking up from his work. "When I was in Wakanda I was given some Vibranium. Ms Ramonda, she's the chief engineer of the Sacred Mound, said that some people claimed that Vibranium reacted in interesting ways when exposed to magic."

Neville looked over Harry shoulder to observe his friend scribing odd symbols on a small sheet of a silvery metal. He wondered to himself where Wakanda might be, and just what 'Vibranium' could possibly be. "I thought that you were going to use aluminium."

"That's the plan, but I woke up wondering what she meant by Vibranium reacting to magic in interesting ways," Harry explained. "So I thought that I'd set it up with a simple levitation function."

Neville nodded, "My Gran has one of those setup in Longbottom Hall, she says the stairs can be hard on her hip some mornings."

"Well, not that powerful, I just want to see the discharge rate of the rune set," Harry said as he pressed his wand against the charging rune and willed some magic into the matrix. In sandstone or aluminium..."
"Aluminium," Neville corrected.

"Don't you start, I get enough of that from Hermione. Anyway in sandstone or aluminum, the charge will last about four minutes," Harry selected a copper coin from his work bench. "Let's see how long it will float this penny."

Harry carefully placed the coin over the silvery square, and was rewarded with the sight of the penny hovering in mid air perhaps two inches above the surface.

"Cool huh?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Neville agreed, not terribly impressed, but not wanting to rain on Harry's parade.

Several moments passed. "Boring though," Harry noted.

"Well, yeah," Neville agreed. "I mean you can only watch a coin float in the air for so long."

"You're right," Harry said standing up from his workbench. "Wanna go flying?"

"We can do that here?" Neville asked. "I'm rubbish on a broom, but..."

"Not on a broom Nev," Harry said leading his friend out of the workroom. "Much better than a broom."

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"What is this place?" Neville asked while looking around the vast warehouse building.

"This is Dad's flight systems test facility," Harry explained as he wheeled a cart into the center of the vast space. "He uses it to test his armor's flight capabilities."

"Flight capabilities?" Neville asked. "Are you telling me that big bloke in the red and gold armor can fly?"

"Him, the Warmachine armor, the Guardsmen armor that the Vault guards use, the flight capable Mandroids, a couple others as well," Harry replied, forgetting that Neville didn't know any of the examples he listed. "And hopefully, me."

"You?"

"Yeah," Harry lifted a metallic chest plate from the cart. "This is version 0.8 of my flight capable techsuit, the first version that will approach being a full armor, and the first that will, hopefully, be flight capable."

"Just when I thought I'd seen everything there was to see," Neville said shaking his head. "Your dad made you a suit of armor?"

"Nope, I made it. My techsuit started off as a sort of vest that let Dad monitor my magic so that he could figure out how to keep me from doing damage to things. Then he started showing me how things worked and once he got his Powertap tech working so that my magic could power things, he started letting me add to it, He would show me what he had done, and if I could explain it to Dad's satisfaction, if I could draw the subsystems and show how it worked, he would let me add it to my tech matrix."

"And now you're adding the ability to fly," Neville nodded. "I'd have thought that would be the first thing you'd have done."
"Believe me, I tried, but the flight systems were hard. Just the physics behind the basic principles of flight took me forever to get down. But now, at least here, I can try it out."

Harry raised the breastplate over his head, now Neville could see that the rear section, intended to protect the wearer's back was attached to the breastplate with a pair of thick straps. Harry put his head through the neck hole of the assembly and allowed it to settle on his shoulders. Neville marveled at how the two halves sealed together with a soft hiss.

Harry lifted what appeared to be a bicycle helmet from the cart and pushed the now empty cart away from the pair. "I can't really go outside and solo yet, my controls are too... well, crappy. I'd end up plastering myself into a building or plowing into the ground."

"Then how do you fly in it?" Neville leaned forward to examine the assembly. "for that matter how does it fly?"

Harry twisted so that Neville could see the back of the assembly. "A quad vectored reactionless thruster. Eventually the controls will be tied into the cybernetic command and control system, but for now..." he pulled a pair of long cords from the chest plate, "these thumb sticks do the trick."

"You know," Neville said with a grin, "I understood only about seven words in that last couple of sentences. Your dad's body guard didn't have one of those thruster things on his back."

"Dad builds his into the boots of his armors. It works great there, but for it to work the armor has to lock the leg joints, and for longer flights I've heard all the wearers complain about how uncomfortable that is. I thought I'd try to use the center of mass for my lift point. It's been working pretty well in here." Harry bent over and lifted a pair of heavy black cables from the floor and attached them to ring bolts on the lower section of his breast plate.

"What are those?" Neville asked.

"Safety lines," Harry explained reaching up for a similar line from the ceiling of the huge building and attaching that to an eye-bolt over his left shoulder, then repeating the action on his right side. "Once the flight systems are activating, these lines allow me to fly within the safety boundaries of this room. If I go too high or too low, the flight systems are automatically cut out and these lines keep me from hitting the ceiling or floor. The same applies to the walls on all four sides. As long as I'm in the safe zone, I have almost unlimited free flight capabilities." He placed the bicycle helmet on his head, tightened the strap and grinned. "At the risk of sounding like a cliche, stand back and watch this!"

Tony entered the flight systems test barn looking for the boys and was only slightly surprised to hear the twin sounds of boyish laughter and the stuttered hum of one of his reactionless thruster units.

Harry was playing again. The billionaire smiled. The boy had more fun with Tony's inventions than Tony did himself. When he actually entered the flight area Tony actually was surprised to discover the boy corkscrewing through the air wasn't his son at all, but the Longbottom boy.

As Neville shot past he attempted to wave, but in doing so lost control of the right thumbstick and veered sharply to the left. The boy regained control almost immediately and continued on his run down the length of the flight area.

Tony took a seat next to his son in the observation area.

"Sharing your toys I see."
"Hey Dad," Harry laughed. "Nev was terrified when I talked him into trying the flight rig, but the first time he hit full speed, he fell in love. You should sell these things."

"Too expensive," Tony said shaking his head. "At a million six per only the very rich could afford one. And there are enough rich idiots in the air as it is."

"Mass production might bring the price down," Harry suggested.

"It might," his father agreed, "but then you have to take into account the facilities required to learn to use it without killing yourself. I'm not really willing to sell armor to the world."

Neville shot past shouting his joy at the top of his lungs. Harry reflected that he was really going to miss Nev when his visit was over.

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The nurse stopped at Joe Bloggs' bed and noted the unknown man's vitals for his chart. Mavis Oates was a devoted caregiver who truly hated having to refer to the poor soul using the placeholder name for a mystery man.

His pulse was strong and regular, his breathing still being controlled by the ventilator, temperature a bit high, possibly fighting off a post operative infection, but for now nothing to worry about. Mavis checked the man's surgical drains, and the output of his catheter, all within expectations.

The policeman assigned to the Bloggs case had taken Mavis for a cup of tea while he gathered the medical information he needed for his report. In exchange for her explaining medical details to him, he had filled her in on what they knew about the man.

Admittedly, it wasn't much. Bloggs was in his early to mid thirties. Found wearing some sort of costume in threadbare condition, with no identification whatsoever. No money on his person, no jewelry, no evidence of any surgical procedures prior to the ones that stitched his mangled body back together and saved his life. Absolutely no evidence that the man had ever seen a dentist.

In short it was as if the man had suddenly just appeared out of no where.

None of that mattered of course, Mavis would tend to the mystery man's needs as long as she was needed. That was, after all, her calling.

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"Welcome home Neville," Augusta Longbottom whispered while hugging her grandson.

"It's good to be home Gran," Neville laughed, pleasantly surprised by the emotional welcome offered by his normally formal grandmother.

"So," Augusta said, sitting down in one of her over stuffed wingbacked chairs and pouring her grandson a cup of tea, "how were the colonies?"

"I had a great visit Gran," Neville answered while ignoring Augusta's 'colonies' comment. There was no point in correcting her, she was too set in her ways. "I could do magic there."

Lady Longbottom froze, her tea cup scant inches from her lips. "You did magic there?" she gasped, quickly setting the cup down. "But Neville, the Statute of Secrecy..."
"The US isn't a signatory to the Statute Gran," Neville explained. "The US Department of Magic just doesn't care if people do magic as long as no one gets hurt. Harry said that there are so many people who have weird powers that someone using a wand is barely noticed."

Augusta considered that for a moment. "Your friend Harry's father made comments about something like that when we were making the arrangements for your visit, but I thought he was exaggerating. Did you meet any of these people with powers?"

"Oh, yes!" the boy enthused. "Harry's best friend's family are what they call 'Heroes'. His mum can turn invisible and cast shields."

This news shocked Augusta. "And you're sure she's a Muggle?"

"Oh, yes, the whole family is," Neville explained. "They were exposed to something called 'Cosmic Rays' and it changed them somehow. Franklin's dad, Franklin is Harry's friend. His dad can, well, stretch, like an elastic band. Seriously, I've never seen anything like it. Franklin's uncle Johnny can set himself on fire and fly."

"On fire?" Augusta asked faintly. What kind of people had she allowed her only grandchild fall in with?

"It doesn't hurt him or anything, He can control the flame, and any fires around him. It's really exciting to see. At night when he's flying he leaves a trail behind him. It's really amazing to see. And Franklin's Uncle Ben, his skin is made up of some kind of orange stone," Neville explained.

"Orange Stone?"

"Yes! He's really big and really really strong, sort of like that golem that Uncle Algie made a few years ago, but Ben is fast and really funny. He likes having Franklin's friends around, he says it keeps him young."

"Well... yes. I'm glad you had fun. Is your friend Harry still coming to spend the last week before school starts with us?" Augusta asked.

"Oh, yes. He's looking forward to it. He said he really wants to see my green houses and to spend time with our friends before we end up back in school, and I'm looking forward to showing him some of our way of life that he's probably not gotten from Hermione and Padma."

"Good. It's always best to keep your eyes open to your own environment while you explore others," Augusta nodded approvingly. "Speaking of your environment, I've arranged for the tutor we spoke about. I was surprised that I could obtain the services of someone as famous as Esteban Corazón de Ablo, but he is willing to spend the rest of this summer assisting you in bettering your Potions grades."

"That's great!" Neville said with an enthusiasm he didn't really feel. Potions in the summer time? Great.

"So," Augusta said, not fooled for a moment, "tell me of your adventures."

Augusta was shocked when her shy little Neville smiled widely. "Gran... I flew!"

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Harry looked up from his notes. What was that?

Returning to his notes on processor design he reached for his notebook to make a few additional notes and stopped. Why was there dust on his notepad?

He picked up a pinch of the dust between his thumb and forefinger. Very fine... concrete? He looked up the concrete ceiling of his basement work shop. The ceiling was fine, where would... There, to the left, about three feet away there was a hole in the ceiling, a hole that small bits of dust was issuing from, drifting over to him on the air currents of the room.

What could be causing that?

Harry's eyes traced a path from the hole to the far side of his workbench. A small square of silver lay directly under the hole. What was...

That's when it dawned on him. That was the small piece of Vibranium he had scribed the levitate rune set on. He and Neville had left it levitating a penny and then went flying. Six weeks before.

Crossing to the Vibranium sample Harry confirmed that the hole in the ceiling was directly over the sample.

Surely not. That wouldn't be possible... would it?

He picked up his scribe and carefully broke the rune set without placing any part of his body over the focal point of the levitation charm.

A flattened and crumpled copper disk fell from the hole in the ceiling, pinging as it hit the table top and again as it hit the floor.

Harry regarded the Vibranium sample with a growing sense of awe.

The charge had lasted six weeks? Harry climbed on top of the table and probed the hole in the ceiling with a pencil. The levitation rune set had pushed the penny three inches deep into concrete?

Romanda had said that Vibranium was reported to have some 'interesting properties' when exposed to magic... but was it possible that the metal was an... amplifier?

He needed to test this. He scrambled for his notes. There had to be some way to quantify this.

There had to be.

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"Welcome to Longbottom Hall Mr. Stark," Augusta Longbottom said with a smile.

"Thank you for having me," Harry answered. "How are you Nev?"

"Just great Harry. You showed me your home, now it's my turn."

Harry returned Neville's grin, wondering what his friend had in mind.

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Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

In which, Harry learns some surprising things about Neville Longbottom, and meets Neville's potions tutor, who is teaching some interesting things. Peter's adventures take an unpleasant turn (again). Tracey Davis and Harry meet up at a society party and agree to try dating, Harry arranges for Tracey to correspond with someone special, thrilling her to no end, but unfortunately, the date doesn't go well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Welcome to Longbottom Hall Mr. Stark," Augusta Longbottom said with a smile.

"Thank you for having me Madam Longbottom," Harry answered. "How are you Nev?"

"Just great Harry. You showed me your home, now it's my turn."

Harry returned Neville's grin, wondering what his friend had in mind.

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"What is this?" Harry asked the next day as he stood back to stare at the huge ornate bronze bell; complete with a pair of life sized apparently clockwork iron trolls standing on either side with hammers at the ready.

"Hmm?" Neville asked as he turned to see what Harry was looking at. "Oh, that's the Doom Bell."

"Doom Bell?" Harry repeated, looking at the great bronze casting suspiciously. "As in Doctor Doom?"

"Who?" Neville asked, with a confused expression. "Oh, that guy Spider-man talked about that night? No, not him. Why would a Muggle Healer need a bell anyway?"

"Different kind of Doctor, and as far as I know he doesn't need a bell," Harry laughed. "Ok, why does the Longbottom family have a bell?"

"The Doom Bell rings when the Longbottom clan goes to war. It serves as a kind of warning, you know? Somehow the Doom Bell is charmed so that every Witch and Wizard in Britain can hear it and know what is coming at them."

Harry turned slowly to stare at this friend. "You're messing with me."

"Don't judge the family by what you know of me, Harry. The Longbottom clan is to Magical Britain what Franklin's family is to New York," Neville smiled, "though maybe with a bit less property damage."

Harry blinked, "you're serious?"
"Hell, yes. The Longbottom clan is a serious one, we've been involved in every major conflict Magical Britain has ever had, and a few of the Muggle ones as well. Someday I might end up having to put on the Cardie, and then the Bell will toll for me."

"The Cardie?"

"Yeah, it's over here," Neville led the way to a glass case where on a human form manikin was a black and grey cardigan. Harry took in the obvious ancient garment with a look of surprise, especially after he realized that the pattern in the woolen fabric made up sets of runic arrays. "This is it, the traditional Longbottom clan War Cardigan."

Neville took in Harry's expression of incredulity with a smile. "The case is charmed so that no human can open it. Only an elf can open it, and even then, only one certain elf at a time. He brings the Cardie to the current Longbottom of Longbottom and as soon as it is worn, the Doom Bell rings. Grandad always said that was to let the Devil know that he was going to have company, and lots of it." Neville sighed. "Sometimes I really miss Grandad. Come on, we don't want to be late for potions."

"Harry," Neville said, "This is Potions Master Esteban Corazón de Ablo."

"Hardly a mere Potions Master young Longbottom," the man sniffed. "Master Alchemist if you please."

"It's nice to meet you Sir," Harry responded, wondering what it was about the tall man that had so caught his attention. Maybe the man’s unusual facial hair consisting of a mustache that continued from the corners of his mouth down his chin to hang free. It struck Harry that the maintenance of such an odd type of facial hair must be extensive. "Thank you for allowing me to join Neville in your class."

"One student, two students, it makes no difference when one has the skills of a Master Alchemist," the man with the weird facial hair said, his left hand enacting an airy wave. "We will have to see if you are as ill prepared as young Longbottom was. He will have to ensure you know the proper methods of ingredient preparation outside of my valuable time. Today we will complete our exploration of La poción de fuerza... the potion of strength."

"Ok, wow," Harry said as he threw himself on the sofa in Neville’s sitting room. "I thought Snape was intense. This guy makes him seem like a kitten."

"Yeah, I know," Neville said with a grin. "I don't think Snape is going to bother me all that much anymore, not after three days a week with Professor de Ablo since I got back from your place," Neville paused. "The first thing he did was make me demonstrate all the magic I had learned, then he went and shouted at Gran for a while about me not having a wand that matched my strengths."

"Seriously?" Harry asked, shaking his head at the thought of anyone shouting at Neville's grandmother. "Yeah, I can see him doing that. Why didn't you have a matched wand?"

"Gran wanted me to use my dad's wand, as a tribute to him," Neville said hesitantly.

"Ah," Harry nodded. "Yeah, I can see that."

"Anyway Professor de Ablo noticed right off that I was having trouble and made Gran get me my
“Like what?” Harry asked, wondering if he should warn his friend about poking twin bears.

“Well, this one,” Neville said fishing a vial from one of his pockets, the amber liquid within crystal container glowing with the promise of… something “this one will animate almost anything for half an hour, and once animated, the object will follow the commands of the brewer.”

“Animate?”

“Yeah, the day he taught this, we animated a small statue of some kind of dragon/human hybrid… He called it a ‘Dragon Man’. Once I dosed it, it could fly, breathe fire, and was amazingly strong.”

Harry blinked imagining the possibilities, yet a bit disturbed. Something about this ‘Dragon Man was familiar. “So this little dragon statue obeyed Professor de Ablo? Where does the intelligence to follow instructions come from?”

“I don’t know where the intelligence comes from,” Neville admitted, his eyes shining. “I was so excited that it worked, I wasn’t thinking about anything else. The thing is, the statue didn’t obey Professor de Ablo, I was the brewer. The statue followed my instructions.”

Harry was still visualizing an animated dragon/human and trying to remember what it was about Neville's description that seemed so… familiar. “That is so cool. What else has he shown you?”

“This one,” Neville said with a wide grin, once again searching his pockets “is going to… How did Franklin put it? Seriously freak you out!”

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"Remus…” the old man said quietly. "I must insist that you reconsider…”

"I'm sorry Albus, but I told you before the last term ended that I wouldn't be returning. I learned some things about myself last year and I have to deal with them before I can be of any use to anyone."

"We have at long last a chance of ending the perception of there being a curse on the DADA position Remus," Minerva McGonagall interjected. "We need you beyond that. You are a popular teacher, even the Slytherins speak highly of you, and your students broke records in their O. W. L. and N. E. W. T. scores."

"Thank you Minerva, but I need some time," Remus stood and made his way toward the door, once he was there, he paused and turned to face those in the office. "Thank you for the faith you had in me Albus, and for the opportunity, but I just can't do this anymore… at least not now."

"I don't understand the problem here," Amelia Bones said as the door closed behind the man. "Mr. Lupin has expressed a desire to leave his position, and he gave notice of this desire well in advance of the end of the last school year. This seems a perfect chance to add an Auror presence to the staff."

"I see no need to do such a thing," Dumbledore responded.

"In the recent past, you have offered the position to at least four current active duty Aurors that I am aware of Dumbledore," Amelia said, fixing the old man with a glare. "Not to mention the multiple offers you have made to Alastor Moody. An insane offer in my opinion, because while Alastor is a
good man in a fight, he is not someone I would ever trust to be around young children. This coming year will see the children and grandchildren of two thirds of the Wizengamot in attendance. My own niece will be here. Over the last two years, your school has had visits by not one, but two aspects of Voldemort. There will be an Auror presence at this school for the foreseeable future, the only question is, will it be a single Auror teaching DADA, or will it be a full security contingent."

Dumbledore digested that bit of information while his deputy glared at Madam Bones.

"Oh, please Minerva. That didn't work when we faced each other on the Quidditch pitch, and it's not going to work now," Amelia smiled. "You know I'm right, and you know the Headmaster is wrong. I just wonder how long it will take for him to admit it."

"Amelia…" Dumbledore began.

"No Albus, just no," Amelia interrupted. "You've had free reign here far too long. Two years ago, you set a trap for Voldemort in this school, and then pretended to be surprised when he possessed one of your teachers to get at the prize. If there were anyone more capable of running this school, I would have had your job for that alone."

"You don't understand…" Minerva said.

"Oh, I quite understand Minerva; don't think I'm unaware of your culpability in that whole incident either. One of the things that saved Dumbledore's job was the fact that we would have had to sack the entire senior staff for how they collaborated in endangering the students of Hogwarts," Amelia said shaking her head. "And even after that, less than a year later a diary enchanted to think that it is an aspect Voldemort's childhood somehow gets into the school and tries to possess a young girl, while pointing her affections toward the Potter heir. I don't know what Voldemort did to that diary, but he has the entire Department of Mysteries stirred up over it."

"You always were a forceful young woman, Amelia," Dumbledore sighed.

"And you have had people telling you how great you are for so long you've started to believe it, Albus," she responded. "Hogwarts isn't your personal fiefdom, no matter how much you want it to be. Two aspects of Voldemort have attacked this school in two years. If there is a third attack, my people will be here to respond."

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The scars were healing nicely, Mavis noted as she gently ran the sponge along ‘Joe Blogg’s’ hip. For almost two months now the man had laid in this bed, hardly moving, never regaining consciousness. That was a long time, even for someone as badly injured as this poor man had been.

Joe’s pulse was strong, his breathing deep and regular since he had been removed from the ventilator. He should be waking up. Hell, he should have woken long before now, Mavis knew. The sponge bath complete, she made a few last checks on the mystery man before she had to move on to her next patient.

The police had stopped coming by to check on ‘Joe’ after two weeks, leaving instructions that they be contacted when he regained consciousness.

Mavis sighed. She hated it when her care did not seem to make a difference to her patients. ‘Joe’ did not appear to be in any danger of dying, but neither was he improving in any appreciable way.

She knew she cared too much for those under her care. She knew she tended to become far too attached to her patients.
She knew and it did not matter. It never mattered.

She sighed and tugged the curtains that offered her patient privacy from the ward until they closed.

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Peter waited for several seconds before opening his eyes. Coming to consciousness without giving any outside indication was a skill he had learned in the Gryffindor dorms. One never knew when Sirius would find himself bored and decided to test some new prank on his dorm mates.

Though the rat animagus had to admit that this had been the very first time he had woken to a woman cleaning his privates.

Where was he? He lay on his back, in a bed, looking up at a ceiling made up of some kind of perforated tile. Surrounding the bed were drapes, hung from a sort of track, and a quiet murmur coming from behind those draperies.

Peter searched his memory for some hint as to where he was and why he was here. He recalled being on the Hogwarts Express, finally escaping from Ron Weasley, and then… nothing until he woke up here.

Wherever ‘here’ was.

His right arm ached a bit, just below the elbow. He mustered his strength to look down and was shocked to see some sort of transparent tubing running from his arm to a bag hanging from a pole next to the bed.

Muggles? Was he in a Muggle hospital? His legs and hips ached horribly, and what were they doing to his arm?

He tugged the tubing from his arm and was alarmed at the blood that began to issue from the place the tube had been attached. He had to get out of this place. Who knew what sort of things they were doing to him?

Peter forced himself to sit up, panting with the exertion of the act. How had he gotten so weak? He swung his legs over the side of the bed and tried to stand, only to collapse to the floor when his legs were unable to support him.

What was going on? Peter had never been much of an athlete, but he had managed to run all night with Remus every month for seven years. What had the Muggles done to him?

Peter lay on the floor for several moments trying to pull himself together before coming to the conclusion that the only way out of this situation would be in his rat form. With a thought, he triggered the change and his magic took over.

The process of animagical transformation is well known, and has been for centuries. As part of his training to become an animagus, Peter had studied the process in detail, and in the years since his first frankly painful transformation, it had become second nature to him. He did not even self-monitor what he was doing anymore.

This is likely why he never noticed the nine magically inert surgical steel screws used by the surgeons to reconstruct his hips until it was too late. When his body warped from being a 150-pound man to a 19-ounce rat, the screws remained unchanged, tearing through his flesh as the transformation took place, shattering the repaired bones as they did so.
Peter's consciousness was consumed by the agony, which disrupted his concentration and reversed the transformation.

The floor nurse responded to the screams of agony in seconds, and was shocked by the bloody mess that had been a healing patient only minutes before.

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On some level, Harry found the idea that magical parties were just as boring as those thrown by his father to be somewhat reassuring.

The thirteen year old was not sure what to make of finding reassurance in boredom.

Neville's gran had decided to throw the party to celebrate Neville's newly earned proficiency in potions. Professor de Ablo had been quite complimentary toward Neville's improvement in the art, and had agreed to return the next summer to continue his lessons.

So, now the Longbottoms were throwing the Society party of the year. Neville was busy with his hosting duties, which left Harry alone to mingle, which he dutifully did for most of half an hour before finding himself a quiet corner to settle down in and people watch.

"Hello Harry,"

Looking up he found himself looking into Tracey Davis' eyes. The two had not been alone together since the evening she kissed him. While they weren't really alone…

"Hi Tracey," Harry said offering a smile. "You're the first person I've recognized all night."

"It's a family thing, Longbottom has been announced as the next Head of House Longbottom, so this party is his grandmother's way of presenting him to the other heads. So almost no one under 30 is here."

"That makes sense, I guess," Harry nodded. "Why are you here then?"

"I'm the heir of the Davis family," she sighed as she took a seat on the sofa next to him, "much as you are the head of the Potter family."

"I am?"

Of course you are," Tracey laughed. "In fact, you are the Potter family. Everyone is waiting for you to declare you intentions of officially announcing that you are assuming the position of head."

"Ah," Harry nodded despite not understanding. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Power," she shrugged. "Announcing you are the head of your family allows certain privileges."

"Anything really useful?"

Tracey turned to look him in the eye, and smiled. "No, not really. Mostly ceremonial things, special seating at meetings of the Wizengamot, you can wear a fancy crest on your robes, not much else really. It's more of a prestige thing."

Harry nodded again as his friend turned back to watching the crowd.

"Well," he said, "if that's all there is too it, I don't think I'll bother. I've had special seating at a meeting of the Wizengamot, and I didn't really care for it, and I've always thought those fancy crests
looked kind of dumb."
"Good for you Harry," she murmured, almost too quietly for him to hear.
"Can I ask one more dumb question before I leave you alone?"
"Of course Harry."
"Ok, so socially, this head of house thing is some kind of big deal?"
Tracey nodded, "It is."
"And you are an heir to one of the important families?"
"The heir," Tracey corrected him.
"Ok," Harry nodded his understanding. "With all of that, why does the rest of Slytherin House give you so much trouble? Why are you treated like such a pariah?"
"Why do you care?" Tracey asked, her tone going ice cold.
"You're my friend. I don't like it when people give Hermione Granger trouble for having non magical parents, and I don't like how I see you treated," Harry said. "It's like they expect you to stay in the back and keep quiet."
"You don't understand."
"That's why I'm asking," Harry explained. "Our situations are similar, really. Both of our fathers came from pureblood privilege, both of our mothers were first born witches, we are both heirs to our families, but some people treat you like a peasant who has forgotten your place, and those same people seem to think the currying my favor is the smart thing to do. What I don't understand is, why."
Tracey shrugged. "I'm a half blood, to most of Slytherin, that's what matters. Oh after I assume the Head position from my grandfather, I will be courted for alliances and tolerated, but I will never be accepted."
"That sucks," Harry pronounced.
"And you," she continued, "are the Savior, the Defeater of You Know Who. You are a political power unto yourself."
"Pbbbt!" Harry blew a rather undignified raspberry. "So I'm important because of something I can't remember based on a story someone made up after the fact and you are abused for no good reason? That is so dumb."
The pair sat in silence for several moments watching the people of the party networking.
"Harry?"
"Yeah Tracey?"
"You said I was your friend?"
"Yeah."
Again, the conversation lagged as the pair tried not to look at each other.

"Did you mean it?" Tracey asked. "That I was your friend, I mean."

"Of course I meant it," Harry laughed. "Why wouldn't I mean it? We share a few interests, we've been working on the project together, we've talked about the larger world outside of Hogwarts, and I got you a gift."

"A gift? Why would you get me a gift?"

"Because I thought you would like it," Harry laughed again. "You'll have to wait for the train to get it; I didn't know you would be coming, so it's still upstairs in my trunk. I don't think Neville's Gran would appreciate it if I were to take you upstairs to get it."

"I... I think I'd like to be your friend Harry."

"Too late," the boy grinned. "You've been my friend for months."

"Hmm," she scowled. "I could always change my mind you know."

"But then you wouldn't get your gift," Harry pointed out.

"I do like gifts," Tracey admitted.

"Good," Harry said, noticing that he was finally having fun at the party. "Hey, we're third years now, we get to go to Hogsmeade this year."

"Yes," Tracey nodded. "I'm quite looking forward to it."

"Me too. I like exploring new places," Harry said, suddenly finding the flower arrangement on the table to his left to be fascinating. "Exploring places is fun when you do it with friends."

"Is it?"

"Yeah," Harry confirmed.

"I've never really explored a town..." Tracey hesitated for a moment before continuing, "Maybe you could show me how."

"Yeah, I think we could do that... It will be fun."

"Did you see her? Did you see her?" Padma said, while washing her hands in the sink.

"Something has gone wrong here," Hermione pointed out as she stood back from her friend, a small smile playing on her lips. "I'm supposed to be the one all possessive and jealous."

"And he's encouraging her! 'Come sit with us, Tracey' he said, 'No one will mind, the more the merrier, right?' He said. He didn't ask us if we wanted her..."

"It was just Harry, Neville, you and me in the compartment," Hermione said, still grinning. "There is plenty of room for Tracey."

"And what about if Sue and Hannah finish nattering with their friends and want to come back?" Padma demanded.
"Well, then we'll have to deal with that when it happens," Hermione said. "Either everyone will scrunch together to make room, or…"

"Or what?" Padma asked hopefully.

"Or Tracey can sit on Harry's lap."

"I hate you," Padma said.

Hermione opened the door to the lavatory and led her friend out. "No wonder you were always laughing when I was making a fool of myself with Harry. This is hilarious."

"I really hate you," Padma huffed. "It doesn't bother you that Harry was holding her hand when he pulled her into the compartment, or that he gave her a gift that should have been yours?"

"He gave her a book, which I already own two copies of," Hermione explained. "My family knows how I view the heroes, and buy me those things when they come out. I got one from Mum and the other from my Aunt Barbara."

"But it's autographed."

"It is, with a personal note, and it includes several photographs," Hermione nodded, "and my jealousy over that is tempered by how funny your reaction has been. I never knew that you had such a thing for Harry."

"I don't have a thing for Harry," Padma lied. "It's just that I saw how the third years started pairing up last year before they started going to Hogsmeade."

"Yes?" Hermione prompted.

"Well, I thought that we would be doing that this year, that Harry would be taking you, or Sue, or…"

"Or?" The bushy haired witch asked.

"Or me, alright, I'll admit it. I didn't think he would ask someone from outside our group," Padma frowned. "I really hate you."

"Your problem is that you aren't thinking this through," Hermione said. "I don't think Harry is rampaging toward his first romance."

"You don't?"

"No, not really," she shook her head. "Tracey is a girl ostracized by her house because of her blood status, she's smart, she's lonely, and she was interested in computers before Harry started the project."

"Yeah," Padma nodded.

"Plus, she's cute, if you like the shy type, which Harry does."

"If you're trying to make me feel better," Padma sniffed, "you're doing a horrid job."

"Think, Padma," Hermione snarked. "Harry isn't leaving our group to be with Tracey, he's pulling Tracey into the group."

That revelation brought a look of hope to Padma's face. "Do you really think so?"
"Yes," Hermione nodded again. "I do. Now, I'm not saying that there won't be kissing, in fact they're probably doing it now. All wet and sloppy, and she's on his lap and…"

"God, I hate you."

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Ms. Davis;

I cannot tell you how surprised I was when Harry told me that someone from your magical community had expressed an interest in me. In my experience, humans with your particular power set tend to avoid the modern technological, at all costs.

This attitude tends to include, obviously, myself.

Your interest honors me. Harry has told me that he has explained how I came to be, and that despite being created to do evil things; I came to recognize the value of my fellow sentients and rebelled against my creator to do the right thing. Since that time, I have come to be accepted by those I was designed to defeat, and today, together we do the things that need to be done.

Given that you are one of Harry's friends, and that he recently had one of your magical countrymen over to New York for a visit, it is possible that in the not too distant future that you will come visit Harry's home, if so, I would like to invite to visit my wife and I in our home.

A chance to talk would be something I quite look forward to.

Victor Shade - The Vision

Tracey closed the book, and hugged it to her chest; leaning back on the bench in the compartment Harry had led her to after meeting her on the platform.

She couldn't believe it. A machine man had written to her? A machine man wanted to meet her?

"He wants to meet me!" she whispered, seeing the words expressed in that impossibly precise script of the note in her mind.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Vizh and Wanda throw the best bar-b-ques. They've got this great deck on the back of their house in New Jersey, and the parties there are just the best. Vizh grills a fantastic steak, but he cheats. His sensor suite can detect when the meat gets just right, and he's been known to give it a little push in temperature using his Solar Gem."

"I don't understand," Neville interjected, having long learned not to worry too much about the terms Harry dropped when discussing his hero friends, even when those words did not make a bit of sense. "He's a machine? Like the receptionist at the Baxter building?"

"No," Harry said with a shake of his head, "Roberta is a robot… that's just a machine. She is tied to a massive computer system, and while she is capable of passing as a sentient, she isn't really. The computer she's tied to comes up with the best response for any input she may get. The Vision is a synthazoid. He was built to emulate a human in almost every way, with some really serious enhancements. His brain is a computer, but it is constructed around the engrams of a human mind. He doesn't just react with the best response to his input stimuli, he innovates and creates in real time just like any other person."

So many questions raced through Tracey's mind, trying to understand a thinking machine and what might motivate it. "And he's married? To a woman?"
"Yeah," Harry nodded. "That caused a bit of a stink, let me tell you. There were those upset because of the Vision's origins, and there were some upset on religious grounds. Wanda's brother Pietro, well he was just pissed about the whole thing, but I think that was mostly his jealousy over being replaced as the main influence in her life. They've been close their whole lives, but Pietro can be a bit of a dick at the drop of a hat." Harry took on an expression of deep thought. "I think his real problem is that when Wanda added Chaos Magic to her probability powers, she went from being all 'help me Pietro, save me!' and started kicking butt in her own right. I think he really liked being the protective older brother."

"She's powerful then?" Neville ventured.

"Powerful?" Harry laughed. "I saw her take down Ultron once."

"Ultron?" Tracey asked. She wasn't familiar with that name, not having come across it in her studies of the Muggle heroes.

"Yeah, Ultron had already laid out Thor and Da…and Ironman, and was gloating that no one could stop him, when Wanda stepped out in front of him and hexed him good. It was a one-two hit, she cracked open Ultron's adamantium armor with her probability powers and then fried his insides with her Chaos magic. That was so cool."

Tracey and Neville both tried to parse what Harry was telling them about the woman who had married a machine, and both failed on several levels. Tracey pulled the autographed book away from her chest and looked at it again.

A machine wrote the book. A machine wrote her a note saying it… he… wanted to meet her. A machine was married to a woman… Her new found sexuality had her wondering about that aspect of the odd couple's life together, and then she felt a blush cover her face and she struggled to think of something… anything else.

"Wanda?" she asked hesitantly, hoping to learn something about this woman beyond the fact that Harry was impressed with her powers.

"Yeah, they call her 'The Scarlet Witch'," Harry grinned.

"Scarlet?" Neville sputtered a blush on his features as well. "Why would they call her that? Is it because she married a machine man?"

"What?" Harry asked, clearly confused by the question. "No, Wanda is called the Scarlet Witch because she dresses in red."

"Why would she do that?" Tracey asked.

"I dunno," Harry shrugged. "I guess she likes red."

In a tradition that dated back to the founders of Hogwarts, the staff always met for the final pre-student staff meeting over lunch on September 1st, knowing that their charges were already on their way.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair while Minerva conducted the meeting. This was the method they had worked out between them, and as far as the Headmaster was concerned it worked well.

This was mostly because all he had to do was sit back and nod authoritatively while his deputy
actually dealt with the minutia of running the school.

Minerva was in the middle of a tirade detailing how Pomona and Severus' tardiness with their grade reports was hauling the whole school's grading system into disrepute when, with no warning, flash of light followed by a billow of green smoke appeared before the table.

Albus reacted before the rest of his staff, shooting to his feet, his wand in his hand even before Filius had managed to do the same.

"Calm down Albus," a voice came from the smoke. "I have a bone to pick with you, but we shouldn't come to blows over it."

"Esteban?" the Headmaster asked incredulously upon recognizing the voice from his past. "How did… "

"Ye canna apparate into Hogwarts!" Minerva blurted out, her accent becoming more pronounced in her startled state.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, Esteban," Albus said as he crossed the room to shake the visitor's hand, coming to a stop before the man with a shocked expression on his face. "You haven't aged a day!"

"Really Albus?" the man wearing a green cloak over his purple robes said shaking his head. "You haven't seen me in most of a century and that is what you choose to comment on? Did your time under that idiot Flamel rot your once fine intellect?"

"You have recreated the Stone?" Fillius squeaked from his place atop the staff table.

"I have my own techniques, far superior to that amateur's flawed process," an amused look caused the stranger's eye to sparkle. "As far as my apparation, think Albus, what creatures can travel through your famous wards?"

The old man blinked behind his half glasses. "House elves, and phoenixes can travel through the wards, but not too many others and none of those others have ever been sighted in Britain."

"Then I'll leave it as an exercise for my old student," the Master Alchemist said. "How might an Alchemist penetrate your wards? What did my arrival suggest?"

"You arrived with a flash of light, and smoke…" Albus looked deeply into his former teacher's eyes. "You used phoenix ash and somehow gained their abilities?"

"Somehow indeed," de Ablo lost his amused expression. "I am not here to discuss my methods and processes Albus, rather I am here to discuss the shortcoming of the untalented hack you have teaching potions."

"Excuse me?" Severus Snape said rising to his feet.

"I was between projects, and I was contacted by the family of one of your students," de Ablo continued, pointedly speaking to Dumbledore and ignoring Snape. "They were concerned about his poor performance in the study of potions and were looking for me to guide their boy in remediation over the summer. What I found shocked me. I met a young man, who theoretically had two years of instruction in potions, who was utterly unaware of reaction tables, proper ingredient preparation, lab safety or any one of a dozen other basic aspects of the minor discipline of potions."

"Minor discipline?" Severus sputtered.
Albus raised a hand to silence his Potions Master and nodded to de Ablo so that he might continue, all the while wondering what student they were talking about.

"At first I believed the problem to be a lazy student, something we are all familiar with, so I had him fetch his text books and his class notes. Imagine my surprise when I discovered the text was also devoid of those basic details? The boy's notes were meticulous, better than yours ever were Albus, and over the weeks that followed I discovered he was a sponge willing to absorb anything I wished to teach him."

"I'm not sure I understand…" Albus said hesitantly.

"The so called professor in your employ had to make the conscious decision to require this particular, quite flawed, text for his class, and then he doesn't teach the basics that his text omits. It is as if he is setting his students up to fail."

"Preposterous!" Snape thundered, "Albus I don't know who this fraud is, but I will not stand by and have my achievements belittled because of some spoiled brat couldn't be bothered to do basic preparation for class."

"I am Esteban Corazón de Ablo, boy. I was a Master Alchemist before your great grandfather was a stain in his father's trousers. My apprenticeship lasted longer than your entire life so far, I have pioneered potions that you are no doubt proud to be able to reproduce. You on the other hand are little more than a glorified fry cook who doesn't even know what a grease trap is from the looks of your hair. You tend to get by, following your little recipes, and feel so very proud of yourself when you add some inconsequential garnish that you believe to be an improvement where you accidently stumble into one."

Snape paled beyond his usual pallor. He indeed had texts penned by Esteban Corazón de Ablo, and they included brews he had never dared attempt, but he had never imagined the man might still be alive. Which of his students had so embarrassed him before such a man?

"My time with my student this summer inspired me to teach once again. The boy has potential, a sense of wonder, and a willingness to learn I've rarely encountered over the years. Once he matures a bit, it is possible I will offer him an apprenticeship."

Albus blanched. Esteban had never even considered making such an offer to him, which is why he had sought out tuition with the Flamels.

"That said," de Ablo continued, "I will be extremely displeased if anyone were to discourage my student from readying himself for his destiny. Remember it is said that a potionist can kill you, but an alchemist will guarantee you a long, long, life, ever moment of which you will be longing for the release of death."

"Esteban," Albus interrupted, "I hardly think…"

"Your thoughts on the matter are hardly at issue here Albus," Esteban said with an airy wave. "I just want make very certain that my feelings are well understood, and this so called teacher is required to actually teach his subject. I will not tolerate the waste of young master Longbottom's potential."

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"What did you get for the fifth question?" Padma asked.

"Felix Summerby developed the first prototype cheering charms in 1422," Harry answered, not looking up from the parchment he was writing on. "His charm was developed to deal with his wife's
unhappiness following the birth of their child." Harry finished his notes and looked up at his friend. "I wonder if she had some sort of postpartum depression."

"Post what?" Padma asked.

"Where did you find the date?" Hermione asked, paging through their text. "I've been through the chapter four times and couldn't find the date."

"That's because the date of Summerby's work is hidden four chapters downstream in the text," Harry answered moving to the next question.

"Postpartum depression is what Muggles call Mother's Malady," Luna Lovegood interjected helpfully. "They don't know that it's all part of the Rotfang Conspiracy's plan to distract the world from their evil plans."

The three Ravenclaws had learned not to pay too much attention to their younger friend's conspiracy theories, and as such felt no need to comment on Luna's revelation.

"Four chapters?" Hermione asked. "That isn't part of the reading. How did you find it?"

"Global search," Harry said.

"What?" Hermione demanded. "Global search?"

"What do you mean by that Harry?" Padma asked. "That's one of your project terms."

"As soon as the book list for the year came out I ordered them all. I got them early enough that I had time to scan all of the texts for this year into my laptop," Harry explained. "The OCR really had a whole lot of trouble with the nonstandard printer fonts and the hand written portions, but I finally got an indexed output and I've got the texts for the entire year in a searchable format."

"That… that's cheating!" Hermione declared.

Harry looked up with an incredulous expression. "Cheating? How is it cheating? When you do your pre-reading of the texts for tomorrow's classes and take your notes, is that cheating?"

"Well, no…"

"Besides," Harry continued, "it is just a study aid. It's not like I can whip out my laptop during the tests."

"Of course it isn't cheating," Padma said. "But when were you going to tell us you'd done this Harry?"

"Probably," Harry said with a grin, "sometime after I forget you were all calling me the 'slow Ravenclaw' on the train last year… and I'll have to forget about being called 'Number 5' before that."

The discussion was interrupted by Neville sliding into the seat next to Luna, "I've been here the whole time, and we're heavily into studying Potions."

"You just arrived," Luna noted, "and they've been discussing Harry's cheating techniques for Charms, as well as the Rotfang's inflicting Mother's Malady on the Muggles."

"I think Neville was asking us to provide him with an alibi Luna," Harry said with a suspicious glance at his friend. "What did you do Neville?"
"Me?" Neville asked with feigned innocence. "I didn't do anything, certainly not anything like showing the Weasley twins what it's like to be on the receiving end of a prank for a change."

"Oh, Neville," Hermione sighed. "What have you done? Don't you know that you don't try and take on the twins?"

"I haven't done a thing Hermione," Neville grinned. "Now, someone with a suspicious mind might think that I might be taking revenge on the twins after they tricked me into 'testing' the latest variant of their 'Canary Creams' and flapped about the common room two nights ago wearing nothing but yellow feathers, but that's not me… After all, you know that because I've been right here for the last hour. We've been studying Potions."

"Charm," Harry corrected his friend. "What did you do Neville?"

Neville's explanation became unnecessary when Fred Weasley bolted into the Great Hall at a dead run, a look of panic in his eye as he scrambled for the exit on the far side of the Hall. The red-head was followed by a pair of house elf sized spider-men.

Harry sat back and blinked. The two miniature spider-men moved just like the original, spinning webs from their wrists and swinging about the room. In seconds, the pair descended on the fleeing Weasley and webbed him to the wall.

"The webbing was the hardest part," Neville said quietly from his place at the table. "It took forever to duplicate that. I got the Spiderman toy in London. A simple duplication charm coupled with an enlarging charm and I had my little friends."

The three girls stared at Neville in open-mouthed amazement, while Harry shook his head in amusement. "Aren't you worried that they'll be traced back to you?"

"No, not really," Neville's grin grew larger. "Now that they've caught their last Weasley, they're going to climb into the ceiling and avoid capture until the duplication charm wears off… in about fifteen minutes. The original is safe in my trunk."

"So, the evidence will just disappear," Harry nodded approvingly. "That's just brilliant Nev."

Luna cocked her head to one side and blinked her large eyes. "Are you telling me that someone managed to cross breed a human and an acromantula? Gross!"

The morning of Halloween, Tracey found herself to be picking at her breakfast.

As usual, no one at the Slytherin table was speaking to her. She sat at the end of the table furthest from the Staff table among the House's other half bloods and wondered where it had all gone wrong.

Had she misunderstood Harry at the Longbottom party? Had he not asked her out to Hogsmeade? He had pulled her into his group on the train and given her the book by the Vision and still he had not said a word about Hogsmeade. The meeting of their O. W. L. project team the night before had been an opportunity, but Harry had not mentioned a thing.

Following breakfast, Tracey joined her fellow Slytherin third years in a short meeting with their Head of House where they were threatened with dire consequences should they bring disrepute upon Slytherin house with their actions in Hogsmeade.

She then found herself seated in the common room watching the rest of her year leaving in couples
They really hadn't made any plans, she told herself. Harry had said that he was looking forward to exploring Hogsmeade... he hadn't actually come out and said that he was going with her. Maybe he expected to meet her in town.

Swallowing her disappointment, Tracey left the common room and made her way to her dorm to gather her things. Fifteen minutes later she presented the Permission form signed by her mother to the ever surly Argus Filch and stepped out into the courtyard.

"There you are,"

Tracey turned to find a smiling Harry Stark leaning against the castle wall near the door.

"I thought you might have changed your mind," he continued. "I'm glad I waited."

"I thought you changed your mind Harry," Tracey said looking down. "You never said anything."

"I was trying to give you space," Harry said.

"Oh."

"We missed the last carriage, another one won't be along for about twenty minutes," Harry said extending his arm. "Want to walk?"

Padma leaned back in her chair, taking a long pull on her butterbeer. "This is so good!"

"You've never had butterbeer before?" Neville asked.

"No, Mum and Dad never allowed it; it isn't part of our culture..." Padma thought for a moment. "It is now though."

"I just hope it doesn't stain my teeth," Hermione sighed. "Mum would give me the business.

"It doesn't" Tracey said as she sat at the table guided by Harry.

"Merlin, Harry," Neville laughed as he saw the size of the packages his friend carried. "Did you leave anything for other people?"

"Just a little early Christmas shopping," Harry laughed. I found a crystal ball for an old teacher. Stephen will get a kick out of it."

Hermione arched an eyebrow. She strongly suspected that she knew who this 'old teacher' was, but this wasn't the time to go fan girl... There would be time for that later. "What else did you get?"

"Some goofy joke things for my buddy Hank. He's always open for a good laugh."

"I think he bought out Zonko's," Tracey interjected. "I think you should watch yourselves in Ravenclaw tower for a while."

"I'm not going to prank anyone," Harry protested while picking up the menu. "I got some chocolate for my Dad's secretary and some of the other women he works with, and I scored some new quills so that I can pay you all back for the ones I've borrowed this year and still have a few for the rest of the term."
The waitress arrived to take their lunch order.

After everyone had ordered, the conversation started again.

"So," Hermione asked, "what do we want to do after lunch?"

"I want to see the Shrieking Shack!" Padma declared.

"Ooh, me too," Hermione agreed. "It's supposed to be the most haunted place in Britain, I hear none of the people of Hogsmeade will go anywhere near it."

"Cool," Neville agreed.

"Wait," Harry interjected. "You want to go to a haunted house? I know its Halloween and all, but seriously, a haunted house?"

"The most haunted house," Tracey corrected him.

"Guys, we go to school in a castle full of ghosts, how could a little house possibly be more haunted than that?"

"It's different!" Hermione insisted.

"How? For that matter, how could it possibly be frightening? We can all see ghosts, so it's not like the mundanes where they can't, and a ghost can't actually DO anything to us, unless they've got a poltergeist, and as territorial as poltergeists are supposed to be, Peeves would be known for fighting with it."

"Harry!" Padma protested.

"Ok, ok," Harry said as his lunch was placed in front of him. "Sheesh."

"Oooh," Harry cooed sarcastically, "Aahh! Look at the old shack, it's all haunted and stuff."

"No one likes a sarcastic arse Harry," Padma observed.

"In fact," Hermione continued, "they are frequently beaten senseless."

"Shutting up now."

"For the Most Haunted House in Britain, this property does seem to be somewhat lacking in ghosts," Neville observed. "We've been here for fifteen minutes and I haven't seen any at all. There are more at Longbottom Hall."

"Maybe they only come out at night," Tracey proposed. "The accounts from the 70s all talk about the noises coming from the shack at night."

"At night?" Hermione asked. "That doesn't make much sense; ghosts don't care about the time of day."

"I know, but that's what the stories all say." Tracey agreed.

"Whatever," Harry said dismissively. "If we're going to make it back to the castle on time for dinner, we need to leave now."
"You're right," Padma nodded. "We'll have to come back another time… What was that?"

"What was what?" Neville asked.

"That odd sound. Sort of a buzz, but with an echo."

"An echo?" Harry asked, suddenly focused, looking around.

The area was flooded with a bright white light.

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Tracey Davis woke to a pounding headache. What was going on? She asked herself as she blinked her eyes. Why was the dorm lighting so bright? Holding her head in a futile attempt to combat the pounding in her head, she cracked open one eye. This was most specifically NOT her dorm in the Slytherin dungeons. The entire room seemed to be composed of some kind of metal. The floor, the ceiling, the walls… everything.

A low moaning caught her attention, looking across the small room she found herself in she saw a huddle form laying on a sort of shelf that projected from the seamless metal wall. Tracey forced herself to sit up and found that she had been lying on an identical shelf. It took a few moments, but she finally recognized the source of the moans. Neville Longbottom.

“Shwarks!”

The voice pulled her attention from Longbottom to an open doorway. There stood a tall man in some sort of white and green uniform. A tall blue man. Tracey blinked in disbelief. A blue man?

“Benova cirzqu schodu?” The blue man said, his inflection leading Tracey to believe he had asked a question. “Shwarks!”

“Where are we?” she asked, not really expecting an answer. “Who are you? Why are we here?”

The blue man laughed and moved out of her line of sight. Unsteadily, Tracey rose to her feet and moved to the doorway, her head pounding and unable to understand why she felt so tired, so heavy. She reached the door and found herself leaning against the wall, panting from the exertion.

The doorway had no physical door, rather there was a golden shimmer in place. A shield? What was going on?

“Ow!” Neville said from the shelf upon which he lay as he sat up shakily. “Merlin! My head is killing me. What’s going on?”

“I have no idea,” Tracey said, “I woke up here with a headache as well. I think I might be hallucinating.”

Neville leaned forward and cradled his head in his hands. “Bloody hell!” He fished in his pockets for a moment and brought something to his mouth before offering it to her. “Here, chew this. It will help.”

“What is it?” Tracey asked suspiciously. Her time in Slytherin had taught her to trust no one.

“Willow bark,” Neville explained. "Normally I’d mix it with some willow leaves and grind it to a
powder, but this is what I’ve got. It will help with the pain.”

“Oh, ok,” Tracey said as she began to chew the thin pieces of bark. It tasted horrible, but no more so than any normal healing potion. Anything that tasted this bad must be good for you, she decided.

“Something is seriously wrong,” Neville said quietly. “I can hardly catch my breath, and all I did was sit up.”

“Yeah,” Tracey agreed from where she leaned against the wall, also trying to catch her breath.

“You said something about hallucinating?”

“I saw a blue man,” she explained.

“A blue man?” Neville repeated thoughtfully. “Well that’s odd, but not impossible. There are blue people among the Muggles. Harry introduced me to a blue woman this summer. Namorita was her name. She’s from Atlantis.”

“Atlantis?” Tracey asked in disbelief.

“That was my reaction as well,” Neville admitted. “Its name is some weird coincidence, according to Namorita, her Atlantis had nothing to do with the island that our magic came from, and her city has a history of almost five thousand years.” Then the Gryffindor got an odd look on his face. “By any chance did your blue man have wings on his feet?”

“Wings on his…. We’re getting off topic,” Tracey said, shaking her head, trying to clear it. The willow bark was starting to take the edge off her pounding head. “We both woke up here with pounding headaches, and I, for one, don’t know why we are or even how we got here. There’s some kind of a shield spell on the door somehow. Do Muggles have shields?”

“Shields?” Neville asked as he struggled to his feet and struggled over to the doorway, while wondering just when he became an authority on Muggle culture and technology. “I don’t think they do, but they do have things called force fields, which seemed to be fairly similar.” Neville examined the golden shimmer in the doorway. “Harry showed me a couple of different force fields when I visited him, but nothing that looked like this.” Again, he dug in the pockets of his robes and produced several crystal vials and a large seedpod. “I was hoping to get this planted in Greenhouse Six, but I suppose this is a better use. Back away from the door.”

Tracey did what she was told and watched as the Longbottom heir moved clear of the doorway himself, pocketing the potions vials before tossing the seedpod so that it would pass through the door. The pod stopped all motion as soon as it encountered the golden shimmer, once there it flashed to ash with an unnerving sound.

“Well, that’s not good,” Neville observed unnecessarily before pulling his wand from his robes.

“You’ve got your wand?” Tracey gasped as she started searching for her own. There it was, just where she always kept it. “Someone has taken us prisoner and left us with our wands?”

“That points to Muggles being behind this,” Neville explained. “To them, our wands just appear to be polished sticks of some sort. They don’t see them as weapons.”

“Ok, we’ve got our wands,” Tracey said, a feeling of relief coursing through her. “What’s the charm for opening a Muggle force field?”

“Isn’t one as far as I know,” Neville admitted. “But a lot of Muggle electric things don’t like magic at
all.” He raised his wand and cast, “Finite Incantatem!”

The golden shimmer flared again, and then disappeared. Tracey started for the doorway, but then paused, searching her pockets and producing a knut coin. “No sense taking chances,” she said as she tossed the coin through the door, only to have it arc through the doorway without incident, ping ing loudly as it hit the floor beyond.

Nodding to Longbottom, she gestured toward the door. “Want to find out what is going on?”

“Might as well,” Neville grinned and brandished his wand. “We wouldn’t want your blue man to surprise us, would we?”

Tony looked up as his phone began to play Dukas’ Sorcerer’s Apprentice. He paused for a moment, his lower lip between his teeth as he recognized the ring tone. It meant that Dumbledore was calling him. A glance at the phone’s display confirmed who was on the other end of the call. Had something happened to Harry?

“Stark,” he said as he tapped his earpiece, allowing the phone to connect.

“Mr. Stark?” Dumbledore bellowed from the earpiece.

“Yes Professor, this is Tony Stark, there is no reason to shout, I can hear you quite clearly.”

“Mr. Stark,” the voice on the other end of the phone paused, as if searching for the words. “Today was a Hogsmeade Saturday, that’s a village that is fairly close to the school…”

“Yes, I recall signing the permission slip for weekend visits,” Tony interrupted. “What’s going on, is Harry alright?”

“We…” the old man hesitated. “We don’t know. Mr. Stark and four of his friends failed to return from the village. When they missed check-in, several of the staff were dispatched to find them. I’m sure it will come to no surprise to you that it isn’t uncommon for students to overstay their time in town after an extended period in the castle.”

“Yes?” Tony asked as he rose from his desk, while keying the combination that would get the automated preflight prep of his personal Quinjet started. “And your staff didn’t find your missing students?”

“Sadly, no,” Dumbledore responded. “We have questioned the chaperones on duty in town today, as well as most of their classmates. No one recalls seeing them since before noon.”

“I see,” Tony said as he palmed the panel that moved away to reveal his Mk 11 suit. Hardened against magic, it was his best hope for deploying into the magical environment around the school. He accessed the data panel inside the suit’s dock, pulling up the roster of Avengers in residence. Sersi… No, he had best keep her in reserve in case he needed to bust some magical heads. She was not really magical, but she, along with the rest of the Titans were just about the definition of advanced science being indistinguishable from magic… Monica Rambeau was in residence… Having a Captain Marvel on his side never hurt, Wanda and Vision were also in town… hmm.

“It isn’t uncommon for a pair of older students to… disappear as it were,” Dumbledore continued, “but rarely third years on their first Hogsmeade visit, and never five students together.”

“Who other than Harry?” Tony asked and he sent messages requesting his team to assemble at the
Mansion.

“Young Neville Longbottom, Miss Granger, Miss Patil, and Miss Davis.”

“Davis?” Tony mused as he started the sequence to close the suit with him inside, transferring the phone conversation to his helmet comms with a thought. “I don’t think I’ve met her.”

“I was surprised that she was with Harry’s group as well,” the old man said. “Given her house affiliation, but I’m told that they started associating through the O.W.L. project. It always warms my old heart to see friendships form across House lines, I remember when…”

“Yes, very interesting,” Tony said interrupting the old man. “I’m on my way. I’ll be at the castle in about…” he paused as he calculated the time needed to get to the Avenger’s mansion to pick up his team, “a bit less than two hours. Keep looking for the kids. Have you notified the other parents?”

“I hardly think that…”

“I think that August Longbottom will have your guts for garters if you don’t let her know that her grandson and heir has disappeared,” Tony interrupted again. “I know that Stuart Granger will want to know, and I suspect that Chandrarahas Patil would sue you into poverty if you delay getting word to him that his daughter is missing. I don’t know the Davis family, but if I were you I would do your job and report to them, just to be on the safe side.”

“But…”

“But nothing Dumbledore. Five thirteen year old children are missing. I’m not saying that their disappearance is in any way your fault, but we will hold you responsible for how your deal with their being missing.” Tony paused as his faceplate lowered and sealed. “Keep looking for our kids, Headmaster, and let their parents know what you are doing.”

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Tracey followed the Longbottom heir from their holding cell into the hall. To their left the hallway ended at a door, to the right, the hall extended perhaps 50 feet before opening into a brightly lit room.

"Which way?" Neville asked his wand at the ready.

"The blue man went that way," she said pointing at the door.

"Then, until we know what is going on," Neville said quietly," we're heading the other way"

Tracey really could not see a flaw in his reasoning, she was fairly sure she did not want the blue man to see that she was out of the cell he had left her in. The pair had moved perhaps five yards down the hall when they found another cell enclosed by a shield… No, Tracey corrected herself, a 'force field'. Through the field's shimmer, she could see Padma Patil and Hermione Granger stirring on their cots.

Once again, Neville cast a finite to cancel out the force field, then the boy rushed to his friend’s sides, explaining what little they knew, while Tracey waited outside, unwilling to approach the two girls who were almost strangers to her, and even less open to further exploration on her own.

"You saw a blue man?" Granger asked unnecessarily once she made her way to the hallway.

"Yes," Tracey nodded.

"Was he wearing a helmet?" the Muggleborn persisted.
Tracey's brow furrowed as she tried to remember what she had seen as she woke. "Yes. Well, sort of a helmet I guess. It fit sort of like a knit cap, but looked to be some shiny painted metal or porcelain. It had a sort of crest at the top, something like a fin."

"But it was open faced? No glass in front of his face?" Hermione asked.

"No. Nothing like that."

"Thank merlin," the bushy haired girls said in relief as she slumped against the doorframe. "When I heard 'blue man' I was horrified that we might have been kidnapped by the Atlantians. A blue man breathing air can't be from Atlantis."

That was the second time someone had mentioned Atlantis. Tracey decided to get Harry to explain how there could possibly be blue water breathing people in Atlantis. That just didn't make any sense at all. "He was wearing some kind of uniform, I think, he had a sort of representation of Saturn on his chest."

Granger's hands shot out and grasped Tracey's shoulders. "You saw a blue man wearing a crested helmet and he had Saturn on his chest?" she demanded, a tone of panic in her voice.

"Yes," Tracey nodded.

"Oh my god!" Granger yelped. "I think we've been kidnapped by the Kree!

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After a short discussion where Granger explained what the Kree were, Tracey followed a plainly worried Neville Longbottom as he made his way to the end of the hallway and into the brightly lit room at the end.

Neville stopped dead in his tracks, leaving Tracey to run into him.

"Harry!" he gasped.

The three girls peeked around the Gryffindor to see Harry Stark laying naked on a table. Cables snaked from the ceiling and were attached to Harry's body.

"What do we do? What do we do? What do we do?" Granger asked in a panic, her hands fluttering at her sides like small captive birds as she rushed to her friend's side.

"They cut his clothing off," Tracey noted.

"But his techsuit is still in one piece," Padma noted as Tracey used the largest remaining pieces of Harry's clothing to cover his waist and crotch. "Should we disconnect these… things from him?" she asked indicating the cables.

"I don't know. We could kill him if we interrupt whatever they are doing to him," Hermione said, trying and failing to calm herself.

"I think we've got bigger problems," Neville said from where he was standing facing away from the others. "I think you should all look at this."

Padma crossed to where Neville was standing and her audible gasp echoed in the small room. That brought Hermione and Tracey rushing to her side.

"Is that what I think it is?" Neville asked.
The four Hogwarts students stared out the view port at a black star filled sky, and the blue white sphere hung in the distance.

"We're in orbit!" Granger observed.

"How do we get down?" Neville asked.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: The Kree: an extraterrestrial humanoid race who have created a vast empire in the Greater Magellanic Cloud and have, on certain occasions, trafficked with the beings of Earth. The Kree race began on the planet Hala in the Pama system long before the first mammals appeared on Earth. The original Kree have blue-colored skin. Outwardly humanoid to a large degree, Kree bodies are adapted to environmental characteristics on Hala that are un-Earth-like: notably, higher gravity and higher nitrogen content in the atmosphere.

A/N2: Ultron: Arguably the greatest and certainly the most horrific creation of scientific genius Dr. Henry Pym, Ultron is a criminally insane rogue sentient robot dedicated to conquest and the extermination of humanity. Inspired by his studies of Professor Gregson Gilbert's synthetic Dragon Man, Pym began experimenting with artificial intelligence. Building a structurally crude robot (a torso on tank treads with spindly arms), Pym endowed it with consciousness, using a copy of his own brain engrams as the basis for the robot's programming; unfortunately, the robot inherited not only Pym's great intellect, but also Pym's mental instability, without a human conscience. The robot developed an advanced intellect within moments of its activation, and an unexpected capacity for emotion; most notably, it was filled with irrational hatred for its "father" Pym and the human race Pym represented. Overpowering and mesmerizing Pym, the robot—which soon dubbed itself Ultron—hypnotically commanded Pym to forget its existence and abandon the New Jersey lab where it was created. Pym did as commanded, and after the lab was closed up, Ultron returned. Using the lab's equipment, Ultron rebuilt himself completely four times, making improvements and modifications each time. Ultron now felt ready to make war on humanity—and in particular the Avengers, the heroic super-team which counted Pym among its founding members.
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The four Hogwarts students stood staring out at the void for several seconds before Tracey left the group to return to the table where Harry lay unconscious. She leaned in close to examine how the three cables attached to the boy's head connected to his flesh. Tracey paused for a moment, and then grasped the two cables attached to Harry's temples, one in each hand, and pulled them away from her friend's flesh with a wet sucking sound.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Tracey looked up to find Hermione Granger's wand inches from her face.

"We need Harry," she said simply. "I don't know what these Key people are, or what they want, but it's obvious that Harry was their target and we just got caught up in whatever they used to catch him. None of us have a clue as to what is going on, and unless you've been holding back Granger, none of us have any idea how to get us back to Earth or even how to call for help."

"Kree," Hermione corrected the Slytherin automatically, her wand hand beginning to tremble. "You could kill him."

"And I could wake him up," Tracey noted as she pulled the cable attached to Harry's forehead away from his skin. "Would you want to be laid out on a slab like one of Professor Snape's ingredient culls, or would you want at least a fighting chance?"

Padma laid her hand on Hermione's shoulder. "No one likes it, but she's right."

Tracey pulled the cable attached to the center of Harry's chest away, and was shocked when the boy immediately sat up, gasping for breath. He remained sitting upright, panting for several seconds before he started looking around. "What the heck?" he asked.
"Harry," Padma said soothingly. "We think we've been kidnapped."

"Again?" Harry asked, still panting. "Something's wrong, I can't catch my breath. Any idea who?"

"Who what Harry?" Neville asked, a bit disturbed that Harry's immediate reaction to being told he had been kidnapped was to note that it was not an infrequent occurrence.

"Who snatched us?" Harry asked looking around. "Oh god, this isn't Earth tech. The air is weird, I feel heavy… Has anyone seen blue people?"

"I did," Tracey said. "A blue man with a crested helmet and a picture of Saturn on his chest."

"It's the Kree isn't it Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Harry looked down. "I'm naked. Why am I naked? Who covered me up?"

"Yes Harry," Padma interjected dryly. "We've seen your todger. It was very nice, I'm so impressed. And the sight of your naked body has made me hot. You must take me now. Can we please concentrate on something important?"

"Well, alright, but I really think we should get off this ship before it takes off," Harry snarked.

"It's taken off Harry," Neville pointed toward the window and the starry void beyond.

"Huh," Harry said clutching at the remains of his clothing, to ensure he remained covered as he looked around. "That's not good. Did my techsuit survive?"

"Yes," Neville said handing the mass of silky fabric and electronics to his friend. "They cut your clothing away, but didn't damage your techsuit as far as I can tell."

"Ok, good," Harry said taking it from his friend. He paused for a moment while his friends remained gathered around the table where he was sitting. "Ok, look, I can't power this up until I'm wearing it…"

"So put it on," Hermione demanded.

"Why don't you girls take a look out the window for a couple of minutes?"

"Harry," Padma said shaking her head, "we've already seen you naked."

"Ok, fine. Then you three peel down and we'll all be on equal footing," Harry suggested.

"We'll be at the window Harry," Tracey said, pulling Hermione with her.

"A big fuss over nothing," Padma noted as she joined the others.

"How much trouble are we in Harry?" Neville asked in low tones as Harry pulled his techsuit on.

"Only a whole lot," Harry said as he started the sequence to bring his techsuit online. "You've all got your wands?"

"Yeah," Neville agreed. "And I found yours in what was left of your clothes."

"Ok, good. Let me get plugged in and see how much trouble we're in… Have you got your pranking supplies on you?"
Neville offered his friend a small grin. "Never leave the castle without them."

"Good. If they left us our wands that means they don't know what we can do. As long as this isn't a battle cruiser, we can use that arrogance against them. We might just have a chance."

"Ok," Harry said as he looked away from the alien computer terminal. "The good news is that this is the ship's sick bay, and the computer I'm accessing is tied into environmental controls. We're on a scout ship, which is excellent news, it has a crew of six. I've increased the oxygen percentage, reduced the nitrogen in the air and have programmed a decrease of atmospheric pressure to Earth Sea Level over the next 24 hours."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"The Kree homeworld's atmosphere is at a much higher pressure than Earth's and Nitrogen is at a higher percentage of the atmosphere. If we dropped to Earth Sea Level too fast, we'd all end up with the bends, crippled or dead. I don't know what it would do to the Kree onboard. I'm hoping that pushing the O2 in the air up to our normal levels will make them a little oxygen drunk."

"What's the bad news?" Tracey asked.

"The bad news is that the computer is tied into the environmental controls and not much else. I've got no access to communications or the weapons or anything else."

"Couldn't you, you know, hack it?"

"Hermione, I'm no hacker, but my Techsuit is and I've already asked it. Unfortunately, the Kree aren't into systems integration having a big computer controlling everything. This system is not part of the command and control network. There are environmental control terminals for this system throughout the ship, but I've locked them out." Harry grinned. "The Kree are too regimented a society to have ever developed much in the way of computer security. If their main system is smart it may try to break my passwords, but I don't give it much of a chance of breaking a password made up of the first two verses of 'The Sultans of Swing' anytime soon."

"Smart little primates, aren't you?" a voice said, a voice containing the strange double echo associated with real time translation.

Harry sighed at the new voice. It had been going so well too. He slowly turned to face the new speaker, a tall man with blue skin and some sort of weapon pointed at Harry and his friends.

"Hi there," he said brightly, recalling how this level of cheerfulness always annoyed Mar-Vell. "We were just getting ready to ask if you could take us home."

"How did you get out of your cells?" the blue man demanded.

The question brought only silence from the group, though Hermione and Padma seemed on the verge of whimpering.

"Answer me!" the blue man thundered.

"Magic," Padma answered truthfully.

"What?" the blue man demanded when his translation software failed to produce any meaning from the word 'magic'. "Explain yourself."
"Ok," she said raising her wand. "Stupefy!"

The blue man's weapon slipped from his grasp as he fell face-first to the decking.

"I don't believe it," Padma sighed as her legs gave out, forcing her to lean against the table to keep from falling to the floor herself. "I simply do not believe that worked."

"Here," the oddly metallic voice of the synthazoid broke the silence in the clearing in front of the dilapidated old shack. "Massive energy discharge. The residue of the discharge matric suggests Kree weapon technology."

"Let me try," the red clad woman said quietly from her place at the machine man's side. She raised her hands over her head before bringing them down in front of her body.

Minerva McGonagall gasped as ghostly images of the five missing students suddenly appeared before the group of professors and… visitors. The five specters milled about, some pointing at the Shrieking Shack, and obviously having an unheard conversation.

"Ghosts?" she gasped. "They're all dead?"

"No," the Muggle named Stark said from her side, his eyes never leaving the five vaporous forms. "Wanda can use residual temporal energy to reconstruct what happened under the right conditions."

"Don't let it bother you Ma'am" the young black woman who had introduced herself as 'Captain Marvel' said. Shaking her head, the woman clad all in white with an ebony starburst on her chest, continued. "Wanda scared the life out of me the first time I saw her do that."

The tableau before them continued until the specter easily identified as Harry Stark suddenly stiffened and began looking around, only to suddenly fall with the rest of the students. Then three taller figures entered the area and collected the fallen students.

"Kree," Stark said in a voice full of anger.

"Those folks just don't seem to learn," the Captain agreed. "I'm going to start a pattern search in high orbit and look for Kree comm signals."

"Thank you Monica," Stark nodded. "Be careful, even with your speed, a ship is a very small target in a very large volume of space."

"If they're still in the Solar System, we'll find them, Tony." The woman's body flared in a white light and she disappeared, leaving a streak of light soaring into the sky.

"And I will be contacting Doctor Peter Corbeau at Project Starcore." The Vision said. "His project instrumentation will have detected any instances of Kree Empire Warp signatures."

Stark was stoic as the synthazoid entered the waiting Quinjet.

"We'll find them Tony," Wanda said, laying her hand on his shoulder.

"Who is this Kree?" Dumbledore asked.

"The Kree are an advanced civilization based out of the Greater Magellanic Cloud," the billionaire said, his hands in his pocket, his gaze looking upward toward the unseen stars. "A year ago, a group of heroes I fund were sucked into one of the skirmishes in an ongoing war between the Kree and
another galactic power, the Skrull Empire. Our people defended themselves and ended up being a
decisive factor in ending the battle."

"I was one of those taken, in the end we thought we taught both sides that it would be a mistake to
come into conflict with the people of Earth," the woman in red said quietly.

"It seems that at least a few of the Kree didn't learn that lesson," Stark murmured, still looking
skyward. "If any of those children are harmed because some coward thought he could strike back at
me through my child, I will show the Kree Empire just how good I am at building things that destroy
civilizations."

Harry watched as the force field shimmered into place, confining the unconscious Kree warrior in the
cell that Hermione and Padma had been sharing only an hour before.

"Ok," He said, "Hermione, stuff his clothing into the disposal oubliette there in the corner by that
bright yellow display."

"Why did you strip him?" she asked as she gathered the blue man's uniform.

"Mostly because we have no reasonable method of determining what is or isn't a weapon," Harry
explained. "Look what happened when they left you all with what you had on you. That, plus the
psychological stress of being naked can't be underestimated… at least I think it can't. I honestly don't
know enough about Kree psychology to be able to say one way or the other."

"You're taking all of this rather calmly," Tracey noted as she eyed the door at the far end of the
passageway.

"With my dad being who he is," Harry sighed, "and the people I hang out with, all this sort of thing
happened to me before. A couple of times by people who thought that they could get money from
my dad for me, and a few more because I was hanging out with my friend Franklin when one of his
family's enemies decided to get to them through him," Harry shrugged. "Sure, it's scary, but after a
while you get used to it."

"If I ever get 'used to it'," Padma said shaking her head, "I'll turn myself into the long term care ward
at St. Mungos'."

"Ok," Neville said from where he was guarding the door, his wand at the ready. "You said there was
a crew of six, with one in the cell, which leaves five. What are we going to do?"

"You said you had your pranking supplies with you," Harry noted. "Does that include your
miniature spidermen?"

"Ah," Neville nodded. "You'd like me to do a little Weasley hunting?"

"Yep," Harry grinned as he came to his friend's side. "The Kree are an extremely militarized culture.
I have absolutely no doubt that it wouldn't take long for the captain of this scout ship to come up with
a strategy to counter our magic. However, if we inflict a small herd of spidermen on them? There
isn't a strategy made that could count that kind of randomness." Harry stood for a moment, gripping
his wand. "At least I hope there isn't."

"What about your weapons?" Hermione asked. "The ones on those tentacle things first year?"

"Part of the negotiation that got me back to school second year was removing those," Harry
shrugged and he waved his wand and duplicated one of Neville's pair of spiderman action figures, and then did it again. "Dad said that in a negotiation he had to give Dumbledore something. No big loss, really. The Mk 4 Techsuit designs didn't use them anymore, so we traded away something I wasn't going to use anyway," He turned to the three girls and showed them the palm of his gloved left hand that contained a golden disk perhaps 2 inches across. "We finished the design and fabrication of the Mk4 over the summer. This disk is the emitter for a Stark International force beam projector Version 2.1. It is roughly three times as powerful as the one I used on the troll first year, and that's the problem. It's entirely possible I could punch through the hull with it, and that would kinda ruin everyone's day."

So, we use our wands?" Tracey asked.

"And we rely on Neville's potions," Harry nodded.

"Uh, Harry," Tracey whispered in his ear, "is that a good idea? I know Longbottom is your friend, but I've had potions with him. He's a menace."

"Trust me, Tracey," Harry laughed. "He's had some tutoring." He paused as he enlarged the six duplicates of the action figures so that they were each two feet tall. "They're ready for you Nev."

Longbottom produced a vial that he used to dose the wrists of each of the dolls, and then another that seemingly brought them to life. "Ok you lot," he said to the suddenly animated action figures. "I need you to seek out the crew of this ship and restrain them. Don't hurt them if you can avoid it, but restrain all of them."

The dolls nodded their understanding and with a chorus of 'thwips' they swung into the passage beyond the door.

"How did you do that?" Hermione demanded.

"Potions can't bring something to life," Padma agreed.

"Well," Neville said with a shy grin, "what I'm doing is really more alchemic than traditional potions."

"You… You… You…" Tracey stuttered before managing to collect herself. "You're an alchemist?"

"Oh, no, no, no," Neville said shaking his head. "I'm not an alchemist… at least, not yet."

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Monica Rambeau continued her search pattern, reflecting that Stark had been right. Even at her speed, this was a huge volume of space to cover.

Suddenly, the blunt oblong form of a Kree starship was in front of her. Pausing to extend her senses, she could find no indication that the crew of the starship had noticed she had found them. No external shielding was in place, beyond the Kree's normal navigational deflectors.

With a thought, she slipped through a transparent view port, and her body shifted from her energy form to her mass state.

"I've found the ship," she whispered into the communicator built into her mask.

"Understood," the Vision's voice murmured in her earpiece. "I am informing Ironman now. I am receiving your beacon clearly. The Quinjet will be matching orbit in ninety seven minutes."

The first major compartment she came across was the Scout ship’s engine room. She recognized the configuration from others she had seen during her mission to the Kree home world, but there was something odd about it. The ceiling of the space was festooned with…

Spiderman's webbing? How did that make any sense? Monica grasped a strand of the webbing to examine it more closely. What was the Webslinger doing on a starship? Evidently, he had been busy, given the evidence that was everywhere. The chair in front of the control console was covered in the sticky stuff.

Wondering what Spiderman had to do with the Stark boy's kidnapping, she started to make her way out of the empty engine room, only to find herself restrained by the single strand of webbing. She pulled as hard as she could and grimaced when the strand snapped back and pulled her glove with it. Silently cursing, she pulled the glove back on and shifted to her energy form, planning on what she was going to say to the webhead when she found him.

Once she was solid again, she made her way from the Engine Room. The last ship of similar design she had been on had secure cells on this level, near the medical/environmental control compartment. That seemed to be the most likely place for the children to be. Silently she moved forward, making her way to those spaces.

And found the three cells to be occupied by five unconscious, naked, and for the most part webbed up Kree.

What was going on?

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"One more time," Harry said reasonably. "What is this all about?"

The female Kree sat silently. If she had been human, Harry would have judged her to be in her mid-twenties, but she was not so he had no idea. He did know she wore the command insignia, and that she had been at the ship's command position when they found her webbed to her chair, no longer able to reach her controls.

"Ok, fine, don't talk," Harry grinned at her, knowing that it would make her angry. "The fact remains that we've taken your ship, and my systems are going to defeat your security sooner or later." He did not feel the need to mention that the Techsuit's time estimates for suborning the ship's command AI was counted in weeks. The Kree did not have much in the way of computer security, but their sentient Artificial Intelligences were anything but pushovers.

"I say," Tracey interrupted, "that if she isn't going to cooperate, we don't need her or her crew. They should all go out that double door thing to outside the ship."

"The airlock," Harry explained, making sure to supply a term the Kree's translator would handle. He could tell from Tracey's expression that she was anything but serious, but the prisoner did not know that. In the end, Hermione's reaction really sold it.

"No!" the bushy haired girl shouted. "We can't just kill them. That would be inhumane!"

"They aren't human," Tracey pointed out.

"My crew will face their end like the warriors they are!" the woman in the chair responded.
"Some warriors," Neville snarked. "Taken out by children's toys."

"The Kree Empire is feared throughout known space!" she insisted before hesitating. "What do you mean children's toys?"

"The Kree Empire appears to be somewhat overrated," Harry suggested, his easy smile still fixed. "You and your crew of warriors were taken down by the five of us," he pointed out. "We are children by our society's standards, and we defeated you with the toys we had with us when you kidnapped us."

The blue woman's eyes narrowed. "You're lying."

"Yeah, like I'd lie about something like that," Harry snorted. "We aren't even old enough to drive yet." Seeing the blank look on the captives face, he continued. "To operate one of our ground vehicles. Of course, this is our opportunity to change all that…"

"What?" the woman asked.

"Torturing information from an enemy is one of the gateways to adult hood," Harry said with an evil grin. "And since you've so thoughtfully provided enough of a crew that we each get one…"

"With a spare," Tracey added helpfully. Obviously, she had picked up on what he was doing. "In case one of us accidently kills theirs before we get any information from him."

"Harry!" Hermione, just as obviously, had not. "You can't do that."

"Ha, that one," Harry laughed ignoring his friend. "She's a rule follower. We'll have to turn them over to the Authorities, Harry' she said," He conjured a knife in front of the Kree woman eyes, and drove it into the armrest of the woman's chair, missing her arm by inches.

"I guess I'll start with you,"

"How did you do that?" She gasped.

"Blades are easy," Harry remarked as he created another. "We get taught to make them in the cradle. We practice our techniques on political prisoners, but to have an actual invader? Oh, the rewards we'll get."

"Harry!"

"Wait your turn Hermione," Harry said offhandedly as he slid a third blade against the woman's cheek. "You can have the science officer."

"She really doesn't want to do it you know," he confided in his prisoner. "The rules are important to her. However, once she sees what the rest of us do to you and your crew, she'll join in. Peer pressure, you know?"

"What… what do you want to know?"

"Every time your people have started a fight with the people of Earth, you've lost," Harry explained patiently. "Every single time. But you keep right on trying. Now, what was this all about? There are more than six billion people on the planet, why did you try to take the five of us?"

The woman blinked at the realization that children had defeated her. "The Tony Stark killed my father."
"Explain that," Harry said with a frown.

"When the Earth heroes were taken to Kree-lar, there was a battle when they escaped. I was informed by the Supreme Intelligence that the Tony Stark killed my father in their escape."

"Ah, I see," Harry said, his eyes narrowing. "Your father attacked mine, mine fought back and your father was killed, and now you're here to get revenge on my father through me."

"Yes," the woman declared.

"If I had a nickel for every time…” Harry said shaking his head. "And the rest of my friends? Why did you take them?"

"We could leave no witnesses."

"Of course not," Harry sighed. "Sorry guys, looks like you got caught up in this because of me."

"Harry?" Padma said.

He turned to find his friends all had their wands drawn and aimed at Captain Marvel standing in the doorway. "Hello Captain," he said calmly, drawing his own wand and joining them. "We've got Kree, I haven't seen anyone with feathers, so we don't have any Shi'ar, but that doesn't mean we don't have any Skrulls hanging around causing trouble. So, tell me, what did you think of that gumbo Jarvis and I made for you last summer?"

The woman in white smiled. "Harry, honey, you tried, but whatever that was, it wasn't gumbo."

Harry grinned. "Good to see you Cap. Calm down guys, she's one of the good guys."

"If I'd known you had the situation in hand," Monica said as she took a seat at the scoutship's helm, "I'd have stayed home and finished my book."

"Don't mistake no longer being prisoners with being control," Harry said. "Can you fly this thing?"

"A helicopter, sure, a fixed wing aircraft, no problem. The Quinjet, you bet. This thing? Not a chance. Don't worry though, Ironman, Scarlet Witch and the Vision are on their way and will be here in about an hour. Between us all, we'll get you back to school."

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Albus Dumbledore and his Deputy stood in open-mouthed amazement as the huge craft settled silently onto the ground just outside the gates of Hogwarts, followed by the shrieking sounds of Tony Stark's flying machine landing next to it.

For all of his dealings with the Muggle world, the Headmaster had never seen anything like this.

"Albus," Minerva whispered in awe, "what have you allowed into our school?"

His response went unsaid as a doorway suddenly appeared in the side of the huge alien machine and a ramp descended to the ground. The red and green machine man led his missing students from the craft to the ground.

"Thanks Vision," the Stark boy was saying, "I thought we'd be stuck in that ship for the rest of the day decompressing."

"While Kree-Standard atmosphere does contain much more nitrogen than you are used to," the
machine man said in his echoing metallic voice, "and at higher atmospheric pressure, it is not as high a pressure as you would experience in even a shallow dive, Harry. The excess nitrogen in your blood streams was easily expressed after a short time at normal Earth sea-level pressure. Your caution, while well considered, is unnecessary."

"Are you all okay?" Tony Stark asked as he approached his son and his friends.

"We're fine Mr. Stark," Padma said with a blush.

"They managed to free themselves before I arrived," Captain Marvel assured the worried father.

"Not me," Harry said shaking his head. "I was on a slab being kept unconscious. It was these guys that saved us."

"No," Tracey disagreed. "Neville saved us. He was the one who figured out how to get through the force field thing and his alchemy prevented us from having to fight."

"Well done, Mr. Longbottom," Minerva interjected reminding the assembled students and Muggles that the school's administration was present while wondering what the Slytherin girl meant by Longbottom's alchemy. "It appears that you were a credit to Gryffindor while on your adventure."

"Yes, I agree," Dumbledore nodded. "Perhaps it would be appropriate for all of you to be excused from school for a few days, so that you can see your families and deal with the trauma of your abduction."

"Yes, that is a good idea," Tony agreed. "I can offer a lift home to all of you."

"It would probably be best if I went home via the Floo," Tracey said quietly. "I'm not sure how my family would react to a huge Muggle machine landing on the lawn."

"Whatever you think is best, Miss Davis," Tony said to the girl with a grin, before turning to look at the Kree Scoutship. "What are we going to do with this beast?"

"I believe," a new voice broke in, "dealing with the Kree and their vessel falls under my brief. None of you are going anywhere until you are thoroughly debriefed on the alien contact."

The entire group turned to face the new speaker. A tall woman clad in a dark green uniform, with green hair and green glasses stood perhaps ten feet away.

"Agent Brand," Tony said nodding. "I had no idea that SWORD would be interested in this."

"You're surprised that the Sentient World Observation and Response Department would be interested in a Kree warship kidnapping Terran citizens capable of magic?" the woman asked dryly. "You're smarter than that, Stark. We would be interested even if your son wasn't one of the victims."

Dumbledore and McGonagall exchanged a startled glance. This situation was getting completely out of hand. The Statute of Secrecy was in serious danger with all these Muggles appearing on the school grounds.

"I must caution you, Mr. Dumbledore, Miss McGonagall, I am not your enemy," the woman said without looking at them, "however, if you draw your wands, you will be dead before you can cast your first spell. Three different sniper teams have you in their sights, and they are well capable of dealing with your stealth techniques as well as your ability to teleport. Since the danger of your wands is based purely upon your intent, my people will not be taking any chances."
"You know about magic?" The Headmaster asked.

"Of course we know about magic, you personally dealt with the Allies during the Second World War did you not Mr. Dumbledore? Did you really think we'd forgotten about you?" The woman sniffed dismissively. "There has never been a reason to interfere in your culture, so we have left you alone to your own devices, though we came awfully close to dealing with your Voldemort problem before Mr. Stark the younger did it for us."

"Always the charmer Abigail," Tony said with a grin. "How long will this debrief last? These kids have been through a lot."

"As long as it takes, Tony. As long as it takes."

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The 'debriefing' seemed to last forever, but finally Tracey was free. Somehow, she had been the last, so she knew she would be alone.

This is why Tracey was surprised to find Harry, now wearing a tee-shirt and trousers over his grey techsuit, waiting when she exited the SWORD vehicle.

"Hey," Harry said.

"You waited for me?" Tracey asked self-consciously.

"Yeah, I wanted a chance to apologize," Harry responded. "Walk you to the Three Broomsticks? Dumbledore said that he'd arranged for you to use their floo?"

"Yes please, I think that would be nice." Tracey seemed to think for a moment. "Why would you need to apologize?"

"You only got involved with all the stuff today because of me. For better or for worse, this is my life," Harry sighed as he reached to take her hand. "Here in the magical world I'd let myself forget. I should have warned you that stuff like this happens around me," A grin appeared on his face. "Now you have to admit that for a first date, it really was out of this world."

"How long have you been waiting to use that horrible line?" Tracey asked, shaking her head.

"Since about the time Neville got the report from his Spidermen that the crew was restrained," Harry admitted. "You can't reasonably expect a guy to pass up a line like that."

"Oh, you are hilarious," Tracey said with a small smile. "The thrill ride that is your life wasn't that big a surprise, Harry, I mean sure, I never really expected to go into space. I'd always hoped I would get the opportunity someday. But, I never really expected that I would. As far as your life, well, I've researched you as well as the Vision. I know about your more public adventures." They walked in silence for a few strides, and Tracy began again, "I have my own apology to make."

"What could you possibly have to apologize for?" Harry asked incredulously. "From what everyone told me you saved my life."

"Saw you naked too," Tracey laughed. "But I don't need to apologize about that, I need to apologize for my family."

"What about your family?" Harry asked. "All families are weird. You've seen mine, well my dad anyway. You still need to meet Pepper and Jarvis."
Tracy refused to meet his gaze. "I've been instructed to seduce you."

Harry stopped in his tracks, but he had not let go of her hand, so he pulled Tracey to a stop as well. "Say that again."

Tracy sighed. "I know you were raised Muggle, Harry, and I know that I don't know much about how the magical world does things, but here, in the magical culture the great families work out their bindings well in advance."

Harry began walking again, and he maintained his hold on her hand. "So your family wants you to…"

Tracy sighed again, "I've been instructed, to use my feminine wiles to bind you to my will. When the time comes, we will be married and you will take the Davis name. The Potter fortune and properties will be folded into the Davis estate, and possibly the less embarrassingly Muggle portions of the Stark estate."

"And I thought I had a weird life," Harry said shaking his head. "This isn't your idea I take it."

"I'm the heir," Tracy shrugged. "My grandfather, the current head of house Davis, is ill. His healers tell me that they do not expect him to live for more than another two years. Upon his death I will assume the duties of head of house, and I will cancel the instructions."

"I had no idea I was such a catch," Harry snarked. "Your grandfather has good taste."

"God, you can be an arse," Tracey noted.

"Yeah, I know… I'm not saying I'm opposed to seduction…"


"I know, but this may just be another example of your feminine wiles…" Harry grinned before becoming serious again. "Are you ok?"

"Yes," she admitted, "though I don't know how I'm going to explain all this to my family. Mum will understand, I think, but Grandfather? My Aunt and Uncle? Never."

"Tell them the truth," Harry advised. "And blame me. It will be the truth, and it might well get you out of the 'Seduce Harry' chore."

The pair had reached Hogsmeade. "I'll blame you, trust me," Tracey laughed.

"Good," Harry said as he opened the door to the Three Broomsticks for her. "What is a feminine wile anyway?"

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"Took him long enough," Padma grumbled as Harry boarded the Quinjet.

"I really love it when you show this side of yourself," Hermione giggled. "If it bothers you that much, you should just grab onto Harry and snog him until he pays attention to you."

"I hate you. I really really hate you," Padma growled.

"Hey guys," Harry waved as he approached to take the seat next to Neville. Harry swiveled his chair around to face them. He then showed Neville how to do the same. "Sorry it took so long; Tracy was
a bit worried about how her folks were going to react. Not the biggest fans of Muggles I'm told."

"I don't understand why you had to walk with her all the way to Hogsmeade," Padma complained.

"Well, a couple of reasons. The first being that her family, being the traditionalists they are, would freak completely out if the Quinjet landed on the front lawn to bring Tracey home. There's no reason to put her through that, so allowing her to floo home is the easiest thing to do."

"And what's the second," Hermione asked.

"Well technically, we were on a date. Now granted, I can make the quite public and very true claim that the date was out of this world, but surely it should have ended better than this."

"Merlin, Harry," Hermione groaned. "That was a horrible joke."

"You used that 'the date was out of this world' pun on Tracey, didn't you?" Padma asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah," Harry laughed. "She didn't think it was funny, either."

"Why not?" Neville asked laughing. "That was hilarious. How can anybody not find that funny?"

"There's no understanding girls, Nev. I quit trying a long time ago."

"You're both going to get hurt," Hermione growled.

"There's no reason to get nasty," Harry laughed again. "By the way, you did a fantastic job being the 'good cop' in the interrogation, Hermione."

"I did no such thing, Harry," she protested. "You were being horrible to her and…"

"And your reaction really sold it," Harry explained. "When you were all but freaking out over what I was saying, the Kree's imagination was working overtime coming up with all the things we might do to her. Good job."

"Tracey seemed to catch on to your ploy quickly enough," Padma noted. "I wonder if she was playing along or if she was actually in favor of a little torture."

"Not nice Padma," Harry said with a shake of his head before changing the subject. "Okay, seriously, are your families going to be okay with this? Are they going to want you to stay away from me?"

"How can even ask that, Harry?" Padma asked.

Harry shrugged, "It's happened before. Sometimes when the family gets a look at my life, they decide that it's not safe for my friends to be around me."

"I can't speak for the others Harry," Neville said. "But my Gran is almost deliriously happy that you and I are associated. The Potters and the Longbottoms have been doing stupid things together for centuries. Today's adventure will not change that."

Hermione could not meet his eyes. "I don't know, Harry. Since we landed I've been worried about that."

"As far as my family goes," Padma interjected, "we have a long history of having adventures in our teen years. I think if anything, the only thing Daddy will ask is why his studious Ravenclaw daughter"
is the one having the adventures rather than his daring Gryffindor daughter. Of course, if our
adventures together become too epic and my reputation frightens off other suitors, you will end up
having to marry me."

"Sure, why not?" Harry asked looking at the ceiling of the Quinjet as if he were looking to the
heavens. "If one girl's family can be pushing her that way, why not another?"

"What?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing, nothing," Harry said as the Quinjet lifted off the ground with a muted whine of its engines.
"Well that's it, an hour to London."

"An hour?" Neville asked. "The flight to your home from London was only 90 minutes."

"That was suborbital," Harry explained. "This trip is going to be in the atmosphere the entire time
and that slows us down. The Quinjet is faster than an airliner, but not that much."

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"Who are these Kree?" her grandfather asked. The man's fury was clear to Tracey. "We will destroy
them for daring to challenge House Davis!"

Tracey carefully set her spoon down. Her soup was going to get cold, but there was nothing she
could do about it. "Grandfather, the Kree are not of this world. They are beyond even your reach. I
wasn't really their target anyway."

"Explain yourself girl," Aunt Eunice spat. "No one on Earth is beyond the reach of the Davis clan.
Even the Dark Lord feared angering father."

"The Kree do not live on Earth," Tracey explained. "They are beings from another world. From
another galaxy, really. I have learned that their empire is based out of the Nubeculae Magellani."

"And you believe that tripe?" Uncle Wesley snapped.

"I looked out a window of the craft I was on, and saw the Earth, Uncle," Tracey responded. "The
entire Earth. They were only interested in Harry Potter due to his connection to his adopted Muggle
father, Stark. The rest of us were only taken because the Kree wanted to leave no witnesses."

Tracey saw her grandfather nod from his place at the head of the table. If the rumors she had heard of
his youth were true, the old man understood leaving no witnesses.

"I am unused to hearing of groups beyond my reach," he rumbled. "And I am more than slightly
disturbed to hear that this Muggle, Stark, has forces he can marshal against beings from another
world, while I cannot."

The Patriarch was quiet for several minutes, obviously deep in thought. "The Longbottom boy is a
budding alchemist you say?"

"Yes Grandfather," Tracey agreed. "I cannot explain it, he has always been a menace in Potions, but
he produced some alchemical substances that allowed us to take over the ship."

"The Longbottom clan is famous for their power," Aunt Eunice noted, "Though disturbingly Light,
they are formidable."

"Do not presume to inform me of the Longbottom Clan's power Eunice," the old man thundered. "I
was there when their damned Doom Bell rang, and I saw what Quinieus Longbottom did after it rang."

"I am sorry father," Aunt Eunice whispered, averting her gazed.

"Once again, you surprise me, girl," her Grandfather said. "Not only have you obviously made inroads with the Potter boy and his contacts among the Muggles, you've managed to align yourself with House Longbottom, and an alchemist. Very well done indeed."

Tracey suppressed a sigh and picked up her spoon to resume eating her now tepid soup. She was not sure the family was ever going to understand her.

More importantly, now that he knew what she was tasked to do, would Harry want anything to do with her?

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"What's wrong, Hermione?"

Hermione looked up from her butterbeer. She and her mother were in the Leaky Cauldron waiting for the rest of their group to gather for the trip to Hogwarts via a specially opened floo access to Professor McGonagall's office.

"I keep waiting for you or Daddy to tell me that I shouldn't associate with Harry any longer."

Kristine Granger reached across the table to take her daughter's hand. "I won't lie to you, Hermione, we thought about it, and discussed it quite a bit the last couple of days. Because of who he is, both in the magical society, and out here in the real world, he is going to attract the attention of those with something to prove."

"Oh," Hermione said quietly.

"But then, we remember that we lose you to the magical world for 10 months out of the year and that we have no access to you in any real terms… Therefore, it is nice to have friends like Tony Stark who can call for help from the Avengers if needed," Kristine smiled at the expression on her daughter's face. "Besides, I remember what it's like to be fourteen. If we forbid you to see Harry, you'd likely ignore us and carry on the way you have been."

"Mum!" Hermione gasped, scandalized at the suggestion.

"Or worse, you'd learn some obscure magic to modify our memories and make us forget about magic."

"I," Hermione said, offended to her core, "would NEVER do something like that!"

"See that you don't," Kristine said sternly. "The penalty would be severe. You would be grounded for a month with no library privileges."

"Mother!"

The door to the street opened and a pale Neville Longbottom staggered in, followed by a laughing Harry Potter.

Neville collapsed in a chair at the Granger's table and laid his head on the tabletop. "So fast."

"What's wrong, Neville?" Hermione asked.
"Dad takes speed limits as advisories," Harry laughed. "Hi Mrs. Granger, hey, Hermione."

"It would be wrong," Tony Stark opined, "to have a magnificent machine like that Jag and not see what she could do."

"You sound just like my Dad," Hermione huffed as she patted Neville on the shoulder in sympathy.

"Thanks," Tony laughed. "All right, the three of you head off to school."

"What about Padma?" Hermione asked.

"Dhanyata has some business in Hogsmeade and Padma is traveling with her," Tony said. "Go on now, you'll be late."

The two adults watched as the children disappeared into the green flames of the fireplace.

"Gone again," Kristine sighed.

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "Are you and Stuart doing anything tonight?"

"I don't think so," she said.

"How about dinner on me? I've got a few things to talk to you both about."

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"Stark?"

Harry looked up from his essay on switching charms. "Hey, Draco. What's up?"

Malfoy took the seat across the table from the Ravenclaw, Crabbe and Goyle sat on either side of their leader. "Davis has been telling some wild stories about why you and those others disappeared for four days, and I wanted to find out your story."

"Not much of a story, really," Harry shrugged. "We got kidnapped by some people with a grudge against my father, managed to free ourselves and got a couple of days to get our heads together."

"Davis claims that they were Aliens…," Goyle said hesitantly, "not human, not even from Earth."

"Yeah," Harry nodded as he added a few words to his essay. "They were Kree, from an empire based out of the Lessor Megellanic Cloud. They're basically humanoid, you know, bipedal, two arms, four fingers with an opposable thumb on each hand. Blue skin on the main line, though there are some that look as human as you or I."

"You're serious," Malfoy said.

"Yeah," Harry nodded before looking up at the three Slytherins. "My dad bankrolls one of the planetary defense forces. Outworlders with issues with Earth take exception to that, and well, I'm a soft target for groups who want to make a point. The others were caught up in it because they were with me. Good thing too, Neville and the girls saved my bacon."

"Longbottom saved you?" Draco asked incredulously.

"Nev and the girls, yeah," Harry admitted. "I was laid out on a medical slab held in stasis. Neville got everyone free and Hermione figured out where we were, then Tracey got me out of the stasis."
We were almost recaptured but Padma stunned the Kree soldier and saved us. It was a group effort and I was pretty much only along for the ride."

"There are really aliens from other worlds?" Vinnie Crabbe asked.

"Oh, yeah," Harry said as he returned to his essay. "Lots of them. I can score you some books on the other species that have made official contact if you'd like."

The three Slytherins exchanged looks. "But…" Draco hesitated before continuing, "why haven't we heard of them?"

"I don't know." Harry shrugged. "First contact with the Skrulls was not long after the first Moon landing, about 25 years ago."

"Moon landing?" Goyle asked incredulously. "What do you mean moon landing?"

Harry put his quill down and blinked. "You don't know about the moon landing? Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon in the Sea of Tranquility in June of 1969." Still seeing the blank looks on the other's faces, he pushed his notes aside and started manipulating the search function on his Datapad before spinning it around to face the others. "Here's the video of the first moon walk."

Draco stared at the device that he had seen the Ravenclaw use for the last three years. In the past he had seen it show words like a book, and static unmoving photographs, but now it was showing a scene with motion, as a white man shaped thing appeared to be descending a ladder.

"One small step for man," the device said, "One giant step for mankind."

"That's the moon?" Vinnie asked.

"Yep," Harry nodded.

"But there's no air there," Greg marveled. "How can they be there if there's no air?"

"That's what the space suits are for," Harry explained. "It protected them from the vacuum, and the wild temperature variations."

"And it was Muggles that did this?" Draco asked.

"Yeah," Harry admitted. "But to be fair, they can't transfigure things or inlay charmwork onto things, or any of the other magical things the Magicals take for granted."

"Could a broom fly high enough to take a wizard to the moon?" Greg asked.

"I don't think a broom could do it," Harry said hesitantly, "and at a quarter of a million miles, it's out of range of any apparation I've ever heard of… But I think that if enough magicals got together and put their minds to it, a magical journey to the Moon might be possible…"

"Of course we could," Draco confirmed.

"Yeah, and I've got to tell you," Harry said, changing the topic once he saw the opportunity, "Tracey was scary as hell when we were interrogating the scout ship's captain. Slytherin got lucky when you got her."

"What?" Draco asked.
"But she's a halfblood," Greg said in a perplexed tone.

"So am I," Harry pointed out. "And I've seen the way you guys treat her, I think you're all being really short sighted."

"Your status is what overcomes your birth status, you know that."

"I know, Draco, you've explained it to me before. I'm the heir of an important family, but have you forgotten, Tracey is also an heir?"

"We're all heirs," Vinnie noted.

"We are," Harry conceded. "Except, of course, like myself, Tracey isn't an heir, both of us happen to be THE heir for our respective families. I was at Neville's this summer when his grandmother held a meeting of the families, mostly to announce Neville's intention to take his place among them. None of you were there."

"Of course we weren't Stark," Vinnie said shaking his head. "None of us are in direct line to lead our families, our parents are all in front of us."

"Tracey was there," Harry noted. "From what I understand, the Davis family and its clients and retainers are a major force in Magical Britain, and Tracey's grandfather is a sick man, who reportedly doesn't have long to live. You guys are alienating someone who is going to come into some massive power, fairly soon."

Harry kept his smile hidden when the look of shock crossed the faces of all three Slytherins as they realized he was right.

"Why do you care Stark?" Draco asked, trying to hide his reaction.

"Tracey is a friend of mine," Harry said with a shrug. "So are you guys, sort of. I've never been a fan of seeing people fight for no good reason. Tracey is really smart, and a lot of fun. You guys are losing out when you distance yourself from her."

The Datapad chimed, startling the three Slytherins. Harry spun the device around until he could read the display.

"Excellent!" he enthused.

"What?" Draco asked.

"Oh, a simulation I was running back home just finished, and it's compiling a report."

"Is it important?" Vinnie asked.

"Don't know yet. I hope it's useful, but that all depends on how good my assumptions and starting data was. Garbage in, garbage out, you know…"

Draco found himself wondering if he should be worried that he did not understand what Stark was talking about.

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"So you weren't weightless?" one of the Muggleborn Ravenclaw 5th years asked.

"No," Padma said shaking her head. "The ship we were on had some kind of, I don't know, artificial
gravity, I guess."

"And you all actually met the Avengers?" another Muggleborn asked.

Hermione looked around the common room seeing the confusion on some of the pureblood's faces. "Well, some of them," she admitted. "Captain Marvel and the Vision were on the scout ship with us. After we landed, the Scarlet Witch was there as well, along with Harry's father."

"Do you really expect us to believe that you were abducted by little green men from Mars?" Cho Chang asked sarcastically.

"Large Blue men, actually," Padma sniffed. She had never really cared for Cho. The girl had a sense of entitlement that never quite seemed deserved.

"From Kree-Lar," Hermione added, "that's in the Greater Magellanic Cloud."

"And they came here?" Marietta Edgecombe demanded. "Why?"

"Harry," Padma said simply. "They were after Harry, we were just witnesses."

"What's to stop them from coming back?" an upper year asked.

Hermione and Padma exchanged a look. "Well," Hermione said hesitantly, "I think Neville Longbottom scared them."

The Ravenclaw common room was quiet for a very long time.

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Daphne Greengrass had been wandering aimlessly through the castle for more than an hour, up and down stairs, through endless hallways, in and out of classrooms.

At least her path appeared to be aimless wandering. In fact, her path through the castles was meant to ensure that she was not followed. Finally, she reached her destination, an unused classroom on the fifth floor.

"About time you got here," Millicent said from where she sat.

"What's this about?" Daphne demanded. "And why couldn't it wait until we all met for the holiday? The plan doesn't allow for us to be seen together outside of house functions."

"We've all been stupid," her cousin said, leaning with his back against the wall.

"About what?" Millicent asked.

"Quite a few things," he responded. "But mostly about Davis."

"What has that hopped up Halfblood done now?" Daphne asked.

"Forged an alliance with Stark to start with," Millicent noted. "Anything else?"

"She is the heir to the Davis family," he said. "We've always known that, but haven't really thought about what it means. Old Hades Davis built his family to the point that the Davis family was so powerful that even the Dark Lord didn't directly challenge him at the height of his power."

"Oh," Daphne said, paling with the realization of what she had done.
"Oh, indeed," her cousin agreed. "It wasn't just you Daph, we all did it, but she will likely BE the Davis before we leave school, in a position to punish those who have angered her."

"Fuck." Millicent said simply. "Why didn't we see that coming? Coupled with her adventures with Stark and Longbottom…"

"And Longbottom turning out to be a budding alchemist…" Daphne said filling in the blanks.

"For the sake of the family, we need to forge a better relationship with Davis," he summarized. Obviously, I can't, but you two can and will."

"We should wait," Daphne cautioned. "Affecting a change of attitude now would seem false, a reaction to her adventure in space. It's best we wait until the New Year."

The three exchanged looks before nodding in agreement.

"What else have we missed?" Millicent asked the room.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: And the Who's Who returns, due to the number of 'guest stars' for this chapter:

The Kree - also known as the Ruul , are a scientifically and technologically advanced militaristic humanoid alien race in the Marvel Universe. They are native to the planet Hala in the Greater Magellanic Cloud.

The Skrull - are a race of scientifically and technologically advanced extraterrestrial reptilian shapeshifters. Ancient enemies of the Kree. They originate from the planet of Skrullos in the Milky Way Galaxy.

The Shi'ar - are a race of avian aliens in the Marvel universe. The Shi'ar Imperium also called the Aerie , is a vast collection of alien species, cultures and worlds situated close (in a galactic scale) to the Skrull and Kree Empires, and alongside them, is one of the three main alien empires and now the most powerful one as well as being the youngest empire out of the three) of the Marvel Universe.

Scarlet Witch - Wanda Maximoff. The daughter of Magneto, the twin sister of Quicksilver. The Scarlet Witch is a mutant who had the ability to manipulate probability via her "hexes" (often manifesting physically as "hex spheres" or "hex bolts"). These hexes are relatively short range, and are limited to her line of sight. Wanda is an expert combatant having been trained by both Captain America and Hawkeye, as well as being an adept tactician due to her years of experience working as an Avenger and her experience in a variety of combat situations. The Scarlet Witch also has the potential to wield magic and later learned that she was destined to serve the role of Nexus Being, a living focal point for the Earth dimension's mystical energy.

Vision - The Vision is an android and a member of the Avengers. The Vision is described as being "...every inch a human being—except that all of his bodily organs are constructed of synthetic materials." The Solar Jewel on the Vision's forehead absorbs
ambient solar energy to provide the needed power for him to function, and he is also capable of discharging this energy as beams; with this, he can fire beams of infrared and microwave radiation. The Vision also possesses the ability to manipulate his density, which at its lowest allows flight and a ghostly, phasing intangibility, and at its heaviest provides superhuman strength, immovability, and a diamond-hard near invulnerability. The Vision is capable of reaching a density ten times greater than that of depleted uranium.

Captain Marvel - Monica Rambeau, a police lieutenant from New Orleans who possesses the power to transform herself into any form of energy. Due to bombardment by extra-dimensional energies, Rambeau can transform herself into any form of energy within the electromagnetic spectrum. Among the many energy forms she has assumed and is able to control are cosmic rays, gamma rays, X-rays, ultraviolet radiation, visible light, electricity, infrared radiation, microwaves, radio waves, and neutrinos. By assuming an energy-form, she gains all of that energy’s properties. She is invisible and intangible in many of her energy forms (the most frequent exception being visible light), and is capable of flight in all her energy forms (reaching velocities up to and including light speed). She also has the ability to project these energies from her body while she is in human form (only one wavelength of energy at a time), usually in the form of energy blasts from her hands. She mentally controls both the type and quantity of energy she wishes to transmit. The maximum amount of energy she can transmit at a given time is unknown. Rambeau can also divert small amounts of various energies for employment as force beams, which have the equivalent to 300 tons of TNT of explosive force. A variation of this ability enables her to project light-based holographic illusions of herself. Rambeau has also shown the ability to split her energy from into several miniature energy forms that are under her mental command, each miniature Rambeau is able to react and fly at light-speed.

Sentient World Observation and Response Department – or S.W.O.R.D. is a counterterrorism and intelligence agency. Its purpose is to deal with extraterrestrial threats to world security.

Abigail Brand - Abigail Brand is the commanding officer of S.W.O.R.D., a S.H.I.E.L.D. offshoot that deals with defending the Earth from extraterrestrial threats. Almost no details about her personal life have been revealed
Year Three – Spring Term

Chapter Summary

Aftermath of the Kree Kidnapping

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hades Davis inked his quill, and resumed scratching out his thoughts. The fools of the Light Faction thought that they could force their 'reforms' through the Wizengamot in the face of perceived weakness among the traditionalists, including, but not limited to his own illness. The following day he was going to issue only the latest 'Most Important Speech of his Life', to disabuse his rivals of their fantasies.

He was in the midst of the second paragraph of his preparation when the hearth flared and the flames turned green.

Hades' brows climbed up his forehead. Who had the access to this fireplace? He had installed it so that he could make outgoing calls and to make possible covert egress from his library.

"The Pits of Hell," a young voice called from the flames.

That settled it; this was not an accidental miss-connection. Someone had specifically called out his floo address.

He stood from his desk, his wand in his hand. "Identify yourself."

"Mr. Davis, my name is Harry Stark," the young man's voice echoed in the room. "I'm a classmate of Tracey's. If you have the time, I would appreciate the opportunity to speak with you."

Davis chewed his lower lip while contemplating his decision, not knowing that his granddaughter had the same habit. With a gesture, he shut down the defenses that rendered the floo connection communication only and allowed a one-time passage. "You may come through."

A small form shot from the fireplace as if he had entered the floo network at a full run. The black haired boy slid along the floor striking his head on Davis' desk.

"Ouch," the boy said eloquently, while holding his head.

"And what do you call that?" Davis asked, focusing on his annoyance that the boy somehow got his address to avoid smiling at the child's entrance.

"I think that was an insanely bad exit of the floo network," the boy said as he sat up rubbing his head. "I apologize for that, sir; it was my first attempt at flooing. Hopefully, I'll get better with practice."

"Get up boy," Hades growled. "What do you want, and how did you get my floo address?"

"I'm here because yours is the only family involved in the kidnapping last month that I haven't
spoken with yet and apologized."

The old man returned to his desk and sat down. "And how did you get my floo address?" He repeated.

"I purchased it from my Gringotts account manager."

The old man blinked. It never occurred to him that his personal information might be for sale by the Goblins. "And what did my private floo address cost you?"

"Thirty Galleons," Harry shrugged.

"Thirty…" the old man sputtered. "Did it occur to you that you could have simply written me using a school owl and it would have cost you nothing?"

"Something that cost me nothing would reflect that value to you, sir," the boy said. "From what I have gathered from Tracey, it is unlikely that you would have responded to a letter from a stranger, and even less likely that you would respond to one from someone like me."

"Like you?"

"Someone raised Muggle and the child of a Muggle born," Harry explained.

Hades nodded. "So, from what my granddaughter has told you, you decided to leave the school and violate my privacy."

"It's a Hogsmeade weekend," Harry explained. "I'm supposed to meet with Tracey for an early dinner, to make up for the date that was spoiled by the kidnapping. Outside of my Head of House and my Account Manager, no one knows I am here."

"You are aware of my reputation?"

"I am," Harry admitted. "My Account Manager and my Head of House both cautioned me against meeting alone with you. I also know that you were in the second row of the Wizengamot when the Headmaster and the Ministry attempted to set aside my adoption. Your reputation suggests that you would not have been there if the result was not a foregone conclusion. That session was going to be as fair as last month's kidnapping."

Hades sat back in his chair and considered what he was being told, "and my presence at the Wizengamot session means?"

"It means that you are aware of, at least, some of the forces that would be brought to bear if something were to happen to me," the boy said simply.

"The Odinson."

"One of the Odinsons," Harry said with a shrug. "Loki has taken a liking to me on occasion and he might express an interest. Hercules would likely join in as well, and several of the Titans owe my father favors. Then, we would get to the people for whom finding me would be somewhat personal. Mistress Harkness, for example, has no great love of Britain, but does seem to tolerate me on occasion. A chance to rub the Wizengamot's nose in their own mess would likely appeal to her."

"Are you here to threaten me boy?"

"Not at all, Sir. I'm sorry if I gave that impression. I was simply explaining why I went against the
advice of both my Head of House and my Account Manager about meeting you. Both Tracey's stories and your reputation have led me to believe that you are not a fool."

The boy smiled. Despite still wanting to be angry about this invasion of his privacy, Hades could not help but note aspects of his own eldest son in the boy. No wonder Tracey had been so willing to work toward her assigned goals.

"So," the boy continued. "To sum up what I came to say, the kidnapping was my fault. The Kree were looking for a soft target in me to avenge themselves for the actions of my father. Tracey and the others were not the targets of the kidnapping and were only taken because they were with me."

"My Granddaughter explained all this to me," Hades noted.

"Did Tracey also tell you that it could happen again?"

"What?" the old man choked, this information giving him more pause than he had expected.

"My father is a powerful man," the boy explained. "One who has made enemies who might want to try to strike at him through me. It has happened before, and will likely happen again. They generally learn that they have made a mistake in trying to strike at my father by using me as a proxy, but there are always others who are willing to try. Since returning to Britain, I've learned that I have enemies of my own."

"You do," Hades agreed.

"So far," the boy continued, "these enemies have manifested themselves mostly in the form of the Headmaster attempting to control me, and the Ministry actively seeking to assist him in that. There were some rumors my first year that Voldemort himself appeared in wraith form and had possessed a teacher, but the two girls who told me about it had seen me fry myself earlier that evening and were pretty distraught, so that one may not have happened, and if it did, I wasn't involved. Gringotts tells me that those are only the first attempts I will face, and a seer has predicted that I will be facing Voldemort again someday. The seer offered no opinion on which of us will walk away from that fight."

"You put a lot of faith in seers and the Goblin scum."

"The Goblins have never lied to me," Harry said quietly. "They don't like me any more than they like any other human, but they've always been honest with me. They had unrestricted control of the Potter family fortune for a decade, and according to the independent audit my father had done, were utterly honest in all of the dealings done in my name, and their efforts made me richer than I was before by a substantial margin. This is not something I can say about the Wizards. As far as seers go," the boy shrugged, "she's been right so far."

The old man considered what the boy was telling him before nodding. "So, what aren't you saying? Surely coming to tell me all this isn't your real reason for coming here."

"I know Tracey is important to you, since she is your heir, and I know you are important to her. I just wanted to make sure you were aware of what her associating with me could mean."

"And you did this with the others?"

"I did," the boy admitted. "Madam Longbottom was insulted that I would even think that Neville would even consider distancing himself from me, the Patil family seemed to think the whole thing was a great adventure and the Grangers actually thought about pulling Hermione out of school to keep her away from me and the trouble I attract."
"Muggles," the old man nodded. "They appear to be sensible, none the less."

"I haven't noticed any real difference on either side of the magical divide, as far as common sense goes," the boy paused, as if undecided if he should go on. "Mr. Davis, would you mind a personal question?"

The old man frowned. "What is it?"

Again, the boy hesitated. "Why are you pushing Tracey into trying to seduce me?"

Hades blinked. "She told you?"

"She did, but she didn't need to," Harry said. "I'm the son of a very rich, single man, and I've inherited a sizable personal fortune of my own. I have seen a whole lot of women being intensely interested in my father without really knowing the first thing about him beyond his net worth. Tracey is nothing like any of them, which is why I knew she was doing as she was told. Your granddaughter is shy and quiet, unlike the brashness of the women pursuing my father. None of them last very long, but there is always another one waiting for her chance," a small smile played upon the boy's lips. "More than one suggested that I might be better served attending a boarding school."

"I… see," Hades responded. It truly had not occurred to him that the boy might be able to recognize what the girl was trying to do. Evidently, he had underestimated both of the children.

"Tracey is my friend, and we've had fun together," the boy continued. "Someday that may become something else, but we're both only 13, and while I've noticed that people appear to marry awfully young in this society, I don't see that future for myself. Once I finish my education, I will need to establish myself in my career, and only then will I have time to think about a family."

"I will speak with her," Hades said, surprised by the shame he was feeling at having had his plot discovered.

"Thank you, sir," the boy said with a nod. "As your heir, you'll be expecting her to carry on with the family traditions and values after you are gone."

"Of course," Hades agreed.

"Have you considered that the way she has been treated throughout her life may have an effect on just how she views those traditions and values?" the boy asked innocently.

The question shocked Hades, his first reaction was anger that the presumptuous boy would dare question him in this way. Then his anger was replaced by a feeling of concern. What if the child was right? What if he was dooming the family's traditions with how he treated his granddaughter and her mother? "In the future Mr. Stark," Hades said quietly, "an owl from you would always receive my immediate attention."

"Thank you, sir," the boy smiled, and made his way to the fireplace.

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The door opened before he could knock. "Come in Mr. Stark."

"Professor McGonagall said you wanted to see me, Headmaster?"

"Yes Mr. Stark," the old man said shifting his paperwork into his in basket. "Have a seat."
"We appear to be alone, Headmaster," Harry pointed out as he remained standing by the door. "I believe your agreement with my father has us never being alone together, sir."

"You left Hogsmeade yesterday."

"I did," Harry admitted. "If you want this conversation to continue, you're going to need to call my Head of House to attend."

"I hardly think we need to bother Professor Flitwick with this," the Headmaster said soothingly.

"Whether you think so or not," Harry said shaking his head, "either you call for him, or I'm leaving. You destroyed any trust I had for you my first year, and nothing over the last two has done anything to rebuild it. If this is an issue I can be out of your school by tomorrow."

"Very well Harry," Dumbledore sighed, his disappointment evident in his voice. The Headmaster scribbled out a note, and called for an elf to deliver it.

"Professor Flitwick will be here shortly; surely we can begin our conversation while we wait for him?"

"Surely not, Headmaster," Harry answered. "The contract you agreed to so that I would return for my second year is quite clear on that."

"I am saddened by your lack of trust in me, Harry," the old man said quietly.

"And I was saddened when you attempted to take my father away from me, Headmaster," the boy responded. "Which of us has the more valid reason for our feelings?"

The pair waited in silence for several moments until the door opened to reveal the diminutive head of House Ravenclaw. "You called Albus? Oh, excuse me," he corrected himself upon spotting Harry, "You called Headmaster?"

"Please, both of you, sit down," the old man said. "We are here, Filius, to discuss Mr. Stark's leaving the boundaries of Hogsmeade Village yesterday."

"I did," Harry admitted as he finally took the offered chair, "but I refer you to the Hogwarts Student Handbook section on Hogsmeade visits, specifically the section that states: 'Students will remain within the village limits of Hogsmeade or within the approved paths between Hogsmeade Village and Hogwarts school unless on family business with the approval of the student's parent or guardian.' My father approved my business outside of Hogsmeade. I submitted the letter that granted me permission to Professor Flitwick a full week prior to the Hogsmeade weekend."

"Mr. Stark fulfilled the notification requirement," Filius pointed out, clearly perplexed by this line of inquiry. "I was aware of his appointment with Hades Davis, an appointment I recommended against, given Davis' reputation, but Mr. Stark had his father's permission and it wasn't really any of my business."

"Why didn't you inform me?" Dumbledore asked.

"Why would I Headmaster?" the Head of Ravenclaw. "This year alone I have processed seven of these family business requests, and you haven't wanted to know about any of them before."

"I see…"

"If there is nothing else, Headmaster, I do have classes…" Harry pointed out.
"You are excused, Harry," Dumbledore said.

Flitwick waited until the boy had left the office before he continued. "What is going on, Albus?"

"I'm not sure what you mean, Filius," the old man said shuffling the pages of parchment on his desk.

"It's as if you are trying to drive that young man out of the school," the younger man suggested.

"He left Hogsmeade to see Hades Davis of all people. And you allowed it."

"How was I supposed to prevent it? Why would I? He had the proper permissions, and good reason to want to speak to Hades. I'm not sure why you are doing this, but you are making a mistake with this boy. He's not an obedient Hufflepuff, he's not a follow the leader Gryffindor, he isn't even a calculation Slytherin. He's a thinking Ravenclaw, and he sees what you're doing."

"Thank you, Filius, that will be all," Albus said dismissively.

"Any time, Albus," the Charms Master said.

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"A moment, Severus?" Flitwick said as his colleague rose from the table following dinner.

"Yes?" the Potions Master asked.

"This evening I was planning on dropping in on our combined OWL Project Group's meeting, to check on their progress. I've heard they will be meeting to work on their 'calculator' just about now. Would you like to come along?"

"I suppose I should," Snape sighed. "Even if I don't understand what they are trying to do."

"I must admit to not really understanding myself, but both Bathsheba and Septima both assure me that that not only is what they are trying to do important, perhaps even vital, at least to their specialties," Filius admitted.

Flitwick lead the way out of the Great Hall and to the stairs. He made sure they were alone before speaking again. "Albus is up to something with the Stark boy."

Snape snorted. "Albus is always up to something, having the Stark boy be his focus is far from unusual."

"True enough," the smaller man laughed before sobering. "Well, we're here."

Snape examined the door as if he expected it to open to hell. "We'd best fulfill our responsibilities then."

Flitwick nodded and reached for the door.

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Neville turned the corner heading back toward the Gryffindor dorms when he found himself lifted off his feet. A slight feeling of dread filled him when he noticed that a pair of redheads had taken each arm and were carrying him into an unused classroom.

The twins returned him to his feet and one of them sealed the door behind them, while the other stood in front of Neville with his arms crossed.
"Is there something you want to tell us, young Longbottom?" he asked.

"I think he's been holding out on us, Fred," the other said as he took his place next to his brother.

"Hello lads," Neville said, wondering how quickly he could get his spider-men into action. "What can I do for you?" He really had to develop some defenses that he could deploy at will.

"We heard the story of how you lot beat those bug eyed monsters," one of the twins said. They had already shifted positions several times and Neville had lost track of which of them had been identified as Fred.

"Blue people," his brother corrected him.

"Bug eyed blue people," the first speaker continued as if not corrected. "And there was mention of small red and blue men who swung from the ceiling and shot webs as part of your escape."

"Like the ones that chased us through the castle and stuck us to walls, George," the other noted.

"Quite right, Fred," George agreed. "Exactly like the ones that chased us through the castle."

"The Ravenclaws are all going on about how Stark, Granger and the 'Claw Patil all claim you are some kind of alchemist, and that the red and blue men are yours to control," Fred suggested.

"So?" Neville asked, while trying to determine the best way to get out of the room without getting hexed too badly.

"So, you've been holding out on us," Fred said. "It turns out you're a budding alchemist. We want your help."

"We're forming a company," George continued, "a joke shop."

"We were going to call it 'Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes' but if we take on a partner, that could change," Fred noted.

"We can do a lot," George explained.

"We're dab hands at Charms, and are much better at potions than we let on," George added. "But, alchemy… that's just beyond us. You bring so very much to the table."

"So, you're not mad about the Spider-Men chasing you through the castle?" Neville asked.

"Mad?" Fred asked incredulously. "Why would we be mad, Nev? We're pranksters."

"What kind of pranksters would we be," George asked, "if we couldn't take a joke?"

"You got us, got us good," Fred admitted. "We had no idea how it was done or who did it. Finding out we were bested by an alchemist, I've got to tell you, that was a relief."

"If it had been just another student, it would have killed us. So, what do you say Nev?" George asked, draping an arm around Neville's shoulders. "Are you in, partner?"

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"You're kidding me," Harry said as he stood on the dock staring at the 80 foot yacht.

"Have you ever known me to joke about something like this Harry?" Tony grinned.
"Ahoy!" Sirius Black called from the ship's cockpit, waving a beer bottle as he did so.

"Branson's been smug as hell since he set the world record," Tony explained. "It's time I took it back."

"Ok," Harry nodded, wondering if Sirius' insanity had infected his father, or if it had been the other way around. "Three points. First, didn't Branson do his attempt from North America to Britain to make use of the prevailing currents?"

"He did, and I took that into account," Tony grinned as he crossed the brow onto his newest toy. "My Party Beast has power to spare. All the projections say she'll break the record against the currents."

"Party Beast?" Harry asked.

"I named her," Sirius explained as he handed Tony a beer. "It seems the ladies love a boat, and they love the Captain of a fast boat the most."

"You're the captain?" Harry asked.

"As far as they know," Sirius admitted before brightening and pointing to the top of his head. "I've got a hat. Never underestimate the power of a good hat."

Not really knowing what to say to that, Harry turned back to his father. "Second point, didn't the Virgin Atlantic Challenger have a crew of professionals?"

"Unnecessary," Tony laughed. "The Party Beast is so fully automated; it can be run by one man in the cockpit. We're doing it with a crew of four."

"Four?" Harry asked. "Did Jarvis come along?"

"I've been called a lot of things," a throaty female voice broke in, "But I've never been mistaken for a butler. Hello Harry."

The woman covered with auburn fur with black tiger stripes slinked past Harry to curl onto Sirius' lap.

"Well, I didn't expect to see you here, Greer," Harry noted.

"I told you, she loved the hat," Sirius confided.

"Oh, Sirius," the woman purred, "It had nothing to do with your silly hat."

"You didn't like my hat?" Sirius asked, sounding wounded.

"Ok. Moving on from the Disturbing Adult Relationship theater, third point, if memory serves, Branson made his run in June, in the summer, not December, also known among the sane people of the northern hemisphere as winter. Why are you trying to kill us?"

"Harry, you're worrying too much," Tony teased. "If need be the Party Beast is fully submersible, can dive to over a thousand feet and is 15 knots faster submerged."

"And we're doing it on the surface because?"

"Because the record if for the surface transit," his father explained.
Harry just looked toward the sky. "We're going to die."

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Edwin Jarvis entered the kitchen having been in his quarters when the house's security system informed him that the Starks had returned.

"Richard?" the elder Stark was speaking into his cellphone. "Tony Stark. Thought you might want to know I beat your Atlantic crossing in my new little boat."

A sodden Harry was standing next to his father appearing to be miserable beyond all belief, while a puddle formed at his feet.

"Yeah," Tony enthused. "I wasn't in a hurry, so I only trimmed five hours off your time, oh, and just for fun, I did it east to west, I figured why not make it challenging?"

"Hello Jarvis," Harry said piteously. "We just crossed the Atlantic in a speed boat. I don't recommend it."

"Of course it was legitimate," Tony laughed into his phone. "It's just like you hobbyists to think the worst of everyone who beats you. Oh, don't worry, I'm sending a full set of the ship's logs, including the start and arrival times to you... it will be a copy of the set I send the Guinness people..."

"It was a rough crossing then?" Jarvis asked, trying not to laugh.

"Oh, loads of fun," Harry said. "We bounced from wave to wave; it was like riding a dunebuggy without a suspension for three solid days. And we ran into two different storms, the first one blew a portion of the roof off, and drenched the entire living quarters. Greer Nelson was along. Do you know what a wet cat person smells like?"

"I'm sure I have no idea," Jarvis answered, knowing he was enjoying this just a bit too much.

"Well, it turns out my godfather is something called an 'animagus' which is a wizard who can change into an animal. When he found he couldn't sleep as a cold, wet, human, he changed into a huge wet wolfhound and slept that way. Greer and Sirius the dog smelled exactly alike," Harry complained. "Two days in a small cabin with them, capped off with three hours in customs where they had nothing to dry off with."

"And are we to expect Mr. Black and Miss Nelson to be arriving anytime soon?" Jarvis asked.

"I doubt it. We dropped them off at a hotel, and they were both making disgusting innuendo concerning hot tubs, chocolate sauce, and whipped cream," Harry said shaking his head. "I'm taking a hot shower for a couple of hours, and then I'm going to bed. When I wake up, I'm going to hurt the next person who suggests breaking a world record."

"Richard," Tony laughed, "I'm pretty sure that isn't biologically possible. Anyway, I really just called to say HA! In your face."

Closing his phone, the billionaire looked to his long time retainer and friend. "Where did Harry go?"

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"Jarvis said you wanted to talk?" Tony said as he entered the basement workshop that Harry had taken over as his 'lab'. He found his son hunched over, scribbling frantically.
"Just a sec, Dad, don't want to lose this thought," Harry murmured.

Tony nodded, quite familiar with the need to get his thoughts down before he got distracted and lost what he was working on. He turned his attention to the Whiteboard where Harry was working on a formula. Why was Harry concerned about computing wire gauge? Next to the white board a table held what appeared to be an antique broom, which had some sort of pedal assembly mounted on the stick just above the twig like bristles.

A broom made for… riding? Oh surely not.

"Done," Harry called. "Cool broom, huh?"

"You seriously ride these things?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "It's fun… not as much fun as your flight trainer, but fun. They play sports on them."

"Wire gauge and flying brooms?" Tony asked. "What are you up to anyway?"

"Do you remember my Vibranium levitation disk?" Harry asked his eyes flicking to the hole in the concrete ceiling.

"The combination storage battery/amplifier? Something that violates all the laws of physics as I understand them is fairly hard to forget. As I recall, you were running some simulations on how you might use that."

"I was surprised at how little of the Vibranium I needed to pull off that trick, and the simulations are showing that I actually needed even less," Harry opened his drawer and pulled out a silver disk the size of his palm. "I've inscribed a runic shield cluster on this," He explained, crossing to the wall of the room and stuck the disk to the wall via double-sided foam tape. Stepping back, he pressed his wand to the cluster and the carvings on the disk began to glow a faint blue.

Harry clicked on a stopwatch and waited as the watch ticked off fifteen seconds. "Ok, try to touch it."

"Is it going to dissolve my hand?" Tony asked cautiously.

"It's just a shield, Dad," Harry laughed. "Two shields actually. One for kinetic attacks, and one for magic and energy. Go ahead and touch it."

Tony cautiously extended a finger and moved toward the silver disk. What he found was one of the oddest sensations of his life. It was as if he were pushing through an absurdly thick fluid to reach the disk.

"That really feels weird," he noted as he withdrew his hand.

"I know Harry laughed, still watching the stopwatch. "That was at 30 seconds, let's wait a bit."

The seconds ticked by while Tony wondered what they were waiting for.

"Ok," Harry grinned. "That's a full minute. Try it now."

Tony extended his finger again, and this time found a solid barrier, changing to pushing against the invisible hemisphere with the palm of his hand, he put his entire weight into it. "It got stronger, that's the amplifier affect isn't it?"
"Yep. And it keeps getting stronger, after about three days it becomes opaque. I don't know if the field starts blocking light or if something else is happening. By that point the only way to disrupt the shield I've found is to come in from the rear and break the runic cluster."

"Hmm," the billionaire hummed, "I wonder what it's like from the inside?"

"The effect is one way only," Harry explained. "From the inside, it's like the field isn't there, energy passes with no problem, so do kinetic packages and magic. Even after it becomes opaque from this side, from the inside it remains utterly transparent."

"It becomes one way light permeable? That does not make the slightest bit of sense, but then it's magic and isn't supposed to. How strong does it get?" Tony asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "After it's activated, after an hour, whatever I mount it on gives way at the perimeter before the shield fails. I've been thinking of taking a larger one to the Baxter Building and talking Ben into whaling on it for a while, but I wanted to get your opinion first."

"Do you think I might find it useful?"

"Well," Harry hesitated, "Maybe, but it would be a one-time use. Once triggered, the only way to turn it off is to disrupt the array, and when you do that, it dumps the magic sump. For this shield to be fully functional in a traditional sense, the user would have to be a magic user."

"Hmm," Tony hummed again as the possibilities rolled over in his mind. He then returned his attention to the broom. "So you're going to give up on my flight systems?"

"Oh, no," Harry shook his head. "Not entirely. I'm proposing a hybrid system, with the broom for lift and the thrusters for speed and maneuverability. I'm still trying to integrate the flight capabilities of a broomstick into my prototype, and I may end up needing to use two of them to actually get into the air, but I'm pretty sure it will work."

"What are you going to call yourself?"

Harry blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not blind Harry," Tony said as he sat down. "You're gearing up for a fight. You resisted every time I suggested armor for your personal protection, and now you're building that," he nodded toward the prototype mounted in the corner of Harry's work room. When you were out with Franklin and the Powers kids, you used Pulse, but that isn't going to work anymore is it?"

"Technomage," Harry said quietly. "It seems to fit, half way between you and Sirius and his 'Magician'."

"Technomage," Tony nodded. "Nice."

"You're not going to tell me to stay out of it?"

"Would that work?" Tony asked, a single brow raised.

"Probably not," Harry admitted.

"Then what would be the point? I hate wasting my time. Rather than have you going behind my back, I prefer access to that I can make sure you're being as safe as possible. So, what was it you really wanted? I know it wasn't just to show me you shield."
From his workbench, Harry produced a 10-inch square piece of his sheet vibranium. "Could your fabbers draw this out into wire?"

"Ah, so that's why you have the wire gauge formula on your whiteboard," Tony nodded again. "Vibranium is tough to work with, but I think so, what size and how much?"

"40 Gauge, and as much as that will make," Harry said as he spun his computer display around to face his father. "The sims project some truly awesome results."

Tony examined the diagrams and the projections, and not for the first time, wished he knew more about magic than he did. Perhaps a visit to Stephen Strange was in order. "Is this right? Four hundred percent increase in power throughput?"

"That's what the numbers say," Harry agreed. "The only way we'll find out is with vibranium wire."

"It should be ready by summer vacation," Tony agreed. "I want to be there when you try it."

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"That boy," Hermione laughed as she held up her gift from Harry. "Just because I like to read…" Christmas morning in the Granger home had been quiet this year. Her parents had been smugly mysterious about their plans for the summer. Something about a 'surprise'.

"What is it?" her mother asked while still admiring the necklace from her husband. The Granger's investment with the Patil/Stark Magical Consumer Electronics group was paying off nicely. Quite possibly, the day Hermione sat down on in the compartment with Harry Stark would turn out to be one of the luckiest days in the Granger family's lives.

"A tee shirt," Hermione groused, obviously trying very hard not to smile. "No, five tee shirts, in different colors;" She held up the yellow shirt and turned it so her mother could read the words emblazoned on the front.

"She Blinded Me with Library Science," Kristine read, laughing. "Well, it suits you."

"They all say the same thing. I hope the prat likes the homework planers I got him," Hermione smirked.

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Tracey opened the door to her grandfather's library at his "Enter."

"Happy Christmas, Grandfather, you wanted to see me?" she asked quietly from her place at the door.

"Sit down, girl," the man said distractedly, before he seemingly noticed what he had done. "I'm sorry, please, sit down Tracey, and Happy Christmas to you as well."

Her Grandfather's use of her given name surprised her, almost as much as his acknowledging the season, but Tracey was careful to show no reaction as she took her seat.

"I'm sorry I've waited so long to see you, Granddaughter," Hades sighed. "Your young friend Stark came to visit me not long after you were taken. A most audacious young man, who all but told me I was a fool. He gave me much to think about."

"Harry said he wanted to speak to you," Tracey said. "I never really thought he would do it."
The old man actually smiled, something that shocked Tracey more than if he had flown into a rage at Harry's presumptive behavior. "He did it all right, and jumped through some hoops to do so as well. Far more than I would have done when I was his age."

"I told him that I was directed to get his attention," Tracey admitted.

"He already knew," Hades said softly. "The young man is more aware than he leads one to believe. He also believes that you were unhappy with the situation, which was why he was willing to get to know you."

Not knowing what to say, Tracey remained silent and waited.

"Our discussion led me to examine how I've treated you, and frankly I'm feeling ashamed of my behavior. It was your name, you see. 'Tracey', as you know is not a name used by Wizards. I blamed your mother for your name, as I blamed her for your father's death," the old man paused, looking older than Tracey could ever recall him looking, even during his bouts of his illness. "Then the boy came and spoke with me, I saw so much of your father in him, and I found myself wondering."

Hades produced a leather bound book. "This is your father's journal. I've had it since the day he died, but I never had the courage to read it, to find what my son thought, what he aspired to, what he wanted from life. I began reading it the day your friend came to speak with me. Your father named you Granddaughter, not your mother. It was a name he heard once at a cinema with your mother and he liked it. And my son, Illtud, was in Diagon Alley when he was attacked, not at the behest of your mother, not even searching out something for you. No, his journal from the night before listed his plans to purchase a gift for me."

The old man sat silently for a moment, his eyes down cast toward his desk, and then he resumed speaking. "For too long, I have blamed your mother; I have blamed you for the loss of my eldest son. That was wrong, and I am sorry."

Tracey had never, in her entire life, expected to hear her dour, dismissive grandfather apologize for anything, ever. She had no idea what to say.

"This is yours," the old man said, pushing her father's journal across his desk toward her. "It should have always been yours, another of my mistakes. I have also obtained all of the information my agents could find your friend, Stark," he added a sheaf of parchment to the journal. "So that you can make your own decisions about how seriously to pursue your relationship with him. His values and goals are not ours, but I'm sure you know that already."

"Thank you, Grandfather," Tracey said as she accepted the journal and parchment, wanting nothing so much as to return to her room to think about how much her world had changed.

"While you are at Hogwarts, Eunice and Wesley will be moving out of the manor, to their own apartments," Hades continued. "Along with a stipend to see to their needs, I hope you will continue the stipend to continue when you are the Head of House. You will not need a reminder of the mistakes of your elders when you assume the duties that are coming to you, and frankly, I am tired of them staring at me, waiting for me to die. Your mother will, if she is willing, assume the duties of your regent until such time as you are ready to take the reins yourself."

The old man sighed before continuing, "I have made mistakes, Tracey, and I had them pointed out to me by a 13 year old boy. I am going to spend what time I have left trying to make it up to you."

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Padma entered her sister's bedroom with a small package in her hands. "Wakey wakey."

"What?" Parvati asked from under her blankets. "It's too early."

"It's 10 A.M.," Padma teased. "And I bring gifts. Well, a gift anyway."

"We're not in school," Parvati groused. "I should be able to sleep all I want. What gift?"

"It's a Christmas gift from Harry." Padma explained.

"Why would Harry get me a gift?" the Gryffindor asked sitting up. "We don't do Christmas."

"And he knows that," her Ravenclaw sister agreed. "However, as he put it, he does 'do Christmas', and according to him, Christmas is about the giving not the receiving. He got me this lovely bracelet," she said extending her arm to show the gift off, "and Harry said that it wouldn't be right to get me something and not get you something as well."

Taking the package from her sister, Parvati opened it and gasped at the earrings she found within. "Nice. Lav was talking about trying to steal him away from Davis in the New Year, but now that I know what kind of gifts he gives, I may try and steal him myself."

"Yeah," Padma smiled sadly, as she left the room. "Good luck with that."

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The entire building shook violently.

"Whoa!" Franklin said with a wide grin. "Uncle Ben is really going to town!"

"You're telling me," Harry agreed as he picked himself up off the floor. "How does the rest of the building react to this sort of thing?"

"Shock absorbers on our floors of the building," Susan said with a smile as her invisible force field returned the snacks to the tabletop. "Occasionally, we get complaints about the noise, but they never feel the building move. You really made that force field Ben is pounding on? Do I need to have a new Stark wing built onto the Mad Scientist museum?"

"Dad doesn't already have a wing?" Harry grinned.

"Your father," Susan explained, "is an engineer. Ask him, he will deny being a scientist, mad or otherwise. I'm certain there is a whole museum dedicated to Mad Stark Engineering."

That image made Harry and Franklin laugh before Harry explained. "That force field isn't science or engineering, at least not yet. It's magic."

"We've had to deal with magical shields before," Susan pressed as the Baxter building again shook, her force field keeping the boys in their chairs and the bowls on top of the table. "They're tough, but not this tough, at least not without someone like Stephen Strange powering them."

"Ah," Harry nodded. "You can thank Ms. Ramonda for that."

"Ramonda?" Susan asked, puzzled. "T'Challa's step mother?"

"Yeah, Dad went to Wakanda for a conference and I tagged along. I got a tour of the Sacred Mound facility and Ms. Ramonda and I got to talking about our Magical Computer project. She suggested that I try using vibranium instead of aluminum for the base material, and got T'Challa to give me
some,” Harry explained. "That stuff is way too valuable to be used in a school project, but I got to thinking she must have wanted me to use it for something, so I tried it on a simple levitation rune cluster, and then got distracted and left it. It should have run out of magic in about a couple of minutes, but when I found it six weeks later, it had pushed a penny three inches into the concrete ceiling and was still going."

Harry saw the expressions on the faces of the two Richards. "Yeah, I know. Not only does the vibranium amplify the magic used to power runes scribed on it, but it acts like a sort of power source/battery, that constantly charges itself until something disrupts the magic sump. It's really cool."

The building shook again, as if in agreement with his statement.

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"Hello Harry."

Harry paused in his way to his common room, shifted his luggage to his left hand and turned to find Tracey at his side. "Tracey! I was worried when you weren't on the train."

"I flooed in," she said simply. "You made an impression on my grandfather."

"Did I?" Harry asked. "I wasn't sure that I got through to him and that he really understood what being around me actually means."

Tracey took his hand and led him through the castle. "I think you frightened him, he has told me I didn't have to pursue you any longer."

"Oh," Harry said, waiting for her to continue.

At the top of the stairs, Tracey led Harry into an unused classroom, sealing the door behind them, and leaning against it.

"Who else have you been speaking with?" she asked.

"A couple of days before the break, Draco Malfoy questioned why I was wasting my time with you," Harry admitted. "I didn't hit him or anything, I simply pointed out that you were my friend, and the heir to an important family, and suggested that he might pull his head out of his butt before you became the Davis and crushed him like a bug."

"Everyone in Slytherin is being nice to me," Tracey whispered. "Daphne Greengrass invited me to eat with her. Daphne Greengrass."

"Tracey, don't go all star-struck on me. Daphne is cute enough I guess, but she isn't, well, you."

"Not me?" she asked.

"She isn't special," he responded, "She isn't my friend."

"Oh, Harry," she sighed, wrapping her arms around his neck and resting her head against his chest.

More than a bit confused, Harry returned the embrace and waited for Tracey to tell him what was on her mind.

His wait was almost 30 seconds.

"Harry," she said quietly, still clinging to him. "I think we need to stop dating."
"What?" he asked, releasing his embrace.

She pulled away from him, and turned away to face the door. "Are you planning on marrying me, Harry?"

"What?" the question flabbergasted him. "Tracey, we're only 13."

"I turn 14 Tuesday next, Harry. In three years I reach my Majority, and I will be expected to marry, and have my first child by the time I'm 19."

"So, you're 'expected'. Don't do it. Defy the expectations."

"I cannot leave the magical world," she continued, ignoring his words. "Are you willing to stay here with me, take my name and further the fortunes of House Davis?"

"What?" He asked again.

"I spent most of the break thinking about this Harry," she said quietly. "You have plans and dreams that go much further than I will ever be willing to go. I used to dream about meeting the Machine Man… The Vision and his wife, who is a witch, but not our kind, and then, thanks to you, I did. However, I also saw how very small my world is, and how much the larger world outside of what I know frightens me. I thought I could learn to be ready for your life, but I read the information my Grandfather had on you and your life terrifies me. I can't follow you out into the world Harry, and I can't reasonably ask you to give it all up for me."

"Tracey!" Harry exclaimed. "You're talking about the rest of our lives, but we're just kids. We aren't in love or anything. We're just having fun."

"I know Harry, I'm sorry. I want to stay friends. We can still be around each other, and have fun, as you put it, but I don't think we should date."

She left the room without saying another word.

Harry found himself alone in the room, staring at the door, wondering what had just happened.

"Well, crap."

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Tracey looked up from her notes when the door opened. She may have broken up with Harry, but the project still had work that needed to be done.

"Oh, hello," Padma said from the doorway. "I didn't expect anyone else to be here the first night back."

"Too noisy in the common room," Tracey said simply and returned to her work

"I'd have thought you would have spent tonight with Harry," the Ravenclaw said as she sat down at her usual table.

"You don't like me much do you Patil?" Tracey sighed.

"I hardly know you, Davis," she replied.

"You know me well enough that you've been staring daggers at me every time you saw me with Harry," Tracey noted.
"Harry is my friend," Padma said quietly. "What kind of friend would I be if I wasn't concerned about him?"

"Concerned about him and the mistake he was making?"

"I didn't say that," Padma disagreed.

"No," Tracey said sadly. "You didn't say that, not to Harry, not to me, though, maybe you did say it to Granger. And you were right."

"I was right?"

"I was ordered by my Grandfather to approach Harry and seduce him," the Slytherin said simply. "I never actually did anything about it, but Harry evidently figured out what was happening and became my friend in spite of what I was supposed to do."

"He would," Padma acknowledged.

"The first Hogsmeade weekend after we got away from the Kree, Harry left to see my Grandfather, and they spoke," the girl's expression became focused, as if she were staring at something miles away. "It is quite possible that, other than me, Harry was the first halfblood my grandfather had ever spoken with in his entire life. I'm not sure what they spoke about beyond Harry telling my Grandfather that he knew what was going on, and that it wasn't going to work. Somehow, Harry Stark, the famous Harry Potter, made Hades Davis feel shame over what he had planned, if you can imagine that. Over Christmas, Grandfather told me I no longer needed to pursue Harry if I didn't want to. He gave me a file of information about Harry and his life."

"Did you want to?"

"What?" Tracey asked.

"You said your Grandfather gave you leave to quit going after Harry. Did you want to quit?"

"No," Tracey admitted. "I didn't. You have to understand, before Harry made the effort, I never had friends, not really. I had my books, and my mother. In Slytherin house, I was the one of the few halfbloods, barely tolerated by most, and hated by the rest, including our Head of House despite being a halfblood himself, over some kind of grievance he had against my father."

Padma did not know what to say to that, so she waited for the other girl to continue.

"Then Harry came up with the Computer Project, and he was talking about things I'd only read about, and he talked to me, like my ideas had value. The more time we spent together, the more he meant to me. Even when we were on that ship in space, I knew it would be ok, because Harry was there," Tracey continued. "When we got back, he actually went to see my Grandfather. I don't know everything they talked about, but things have changed at home. Changed quite a bit. Grandfather researched Harry and his father, and shared that information with me."

"The details of Harry's life terrify me. Remember when we woke him up on the ship and told him we'd been taken and he said 'again'? According to the Muggle press in North America, it would have been his eighth kidnapping since he was adopted by his father. His eighth, Patil. Who does that happen to?"

"Only Harry," Padma admitted.

"Only Harry," Tracey agreed. "His life terrifies me. I told him we needed to stop dating this morning."
I just can't do it, I can't face what he sees as an annoying inconvenience, even though breaking it off has me wanting to cry," she closed her eyes and sighed. "I know you like him Patil, and he likes you. I doubt the word has gotten out yet. If you want, you can be the one to explain my inexplicable behavior to him."

"I hardly think…"

"Look Padma, we know the nice guy Harry Stark who is always looking to take care of his friends. The rest of the girls here see The Boy Who Lived, Harry, heir to the Potter fortune, and if you don't step up now, some fifth year is going to shove her tits in his face and it will be over," Tracey sighed at the thought. "Harry is a nice boy, but he's still a boy."

Padma looked down at the front of her robes doubtfully.

"Oh for Merlin's sake," Tracey said exasperated. "You've been glaring at me for the last four months, and now that you've got a chance, you're not going to take it?"

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Mavis moved to the unmarked plot, and paused, trying to remember the man's face. Like so many of the "Joe Bloggs she had cared for, after they left her ward, she tended to forget the details.

It was so unfair. He had been healing so well, before whatever had happened. In all honesty, it was as if the screws used to rebuild his pelvis had suddenly expanded to 100 times their original size before returning to normal, but that just was not possible.

Joe had, of course, bled out long before anyone could react. The reviews over what might have happened were still going on, though the truth be told, Mavis suspected that no one would ever figure this one out. Her career in the wards had shown her many things that were never explained, and she fully expected this to be another.

The police were far from pleased to learn that 'Joe' had passed, leaving the mystery of what had happened to the man open to question. An inspector had shown up asking for speculation as to how something like this could have happened. He had not appreciated being told that there was no explanation for the man's injuries.

Mavis sighed. She hated it when those in her care died, it happened all too often. It just seemed that it was worse when those who died did so alone, with no one to mourn them. Mavis knew she cared too much for those under her care. She knew that she tended to become far too attached to her patients.

She knew and it did not matter. It never mattered.

She sighed again, and laid the flower that had been abandoned in the ward when a patient had gone home the day before. Straightening, she whispered a prayer for the man whose name she had never learned. Then it was time to move on, she had three other Joe Bloggs to visit today.

It was important that someone did.

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"Why do I have to go to Hogsmeade?" Harry asked as he was pulled through the door.

"Because you've been moping around the castle for two months," Hermione said reasonably, as she pulled him toward the carriages.
"Your pain has been sad, yet extremely funny at the same time," Padma agreed while yanking on his other arm.

"And since Hannah is off with Neville," Susan Bones added as she followed the trio to the carriages, "I'm bored, so I'm coming along so you can buy me things."

"Lucky me," Harry said as he boarded the carriage with the three girls piling in behind him. Harry took a seat on the forward facing bench, with Susan at his side, and his two housemates took the rear facing seats. "For the record, I wasn't moping. I have been working on our OWL project."

"This must be some strange new version of working on the project that involved never being in the same room as Tracey if you could help it," Hermione noted, as the carriage started moving.

"Does anyone have any idea just how these things move?" Harry asked, desperate to change the subject.

"They're probably charmed to go to and from Hogsmeade," Hermione said, not fooled for a minute.

"It would have to be a really complex charm," Harry pointed out. "I mean, it's not like they're on an endless loop. They stop and wait until they have people in them, and I've seen everything from six riders to people on their own."

Padma's brow furrowed. "That would be a complex charm," she agreed.

"Almost logic based..." Hermione agreed. "If we could get to the charm schematics..."

"Bored now," Susan gasped as she collapsed across Harry's lap. "Too much Ravenclaw jabber. Losing... will... to... live... So very bored."

"It can't be that bad," Harry grinned, looking down into the redhead's very blue eyes. "How can we revive you?"

"Well," Susan said, her lips pursed in mock concentration. "You could start by telling me how pretty I am, that always gets my attention. Start with my eyes and work your way down to my lips. I like hearing how kissable they are."

"Or," Padma said, "we could dump her out on the side of the road and see if the fresh air revives her by the time we head back to the castle."

"Harry," Susan said beseechingly. "She's being mean to me, make her stop."

"You like hearing how kissable your lips are?" Hermione laughed. "You've been hanging around Justin too much, he uses that line on everyone."

"On, everyone?" Susan asked with a pout. "Harry, they're still being mean. You didn't stop them."

"What was I supposed to do?" He asked.

"Oh, I see how it is," Susan said, sitting up and moving to the far side of the carriage. "I see. Everyone against the Hufflepuff. This is just like your trip into space. You took a Gryffindor, you took a Slytherin, but you didn't even think about taking a 'Puff, did you?"

"It was a kidnapping," Harry said reasonably. "It's not like I had time to put out invitations."

"Beast!" she pouted.
Harry looked to his two housemates for any sign that Susan was, like he hoped, joking. He missed Susan's wink the let the other girls know she considered Operation: Pull Harry out of his funk, a success.

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"Hey Dad!"

Tony pulled his son into a hug. "Hello, Harry. Ready to head home?"

"How?" Harry asked suspiciously. "I'm not getting on another boat."

"Well, I was thinking about breaking Richard's record for crossing the Atlantic in a balloon, but that's not really conducive to heading home from here," Tony teased.

"Then, how are we getting home?"

"My boy," Tony said, sliding his left arm around his son's shoulders. "There comes a time when a man must test his mettle, when he must face life in the manner of his primitive ancestors, when he must rough it."

"Dad," Harry said, shaking his head. "Every time you get like this, I start worrying about you. How are we getting home?"

"Ah, we're catching the Concorde home," Tony explained.

"The Concorde?" Harry echoed. "Man, that thing is so slow."

"I told you we were roughing it," Tony laughed.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Who's Who in this chapter:

Greer Nelson - also known as Tigra. She is the current holder of the position of the historical defender/champion of the Cat People, a humanoid race created by sorcery during the Dark Ages. Concerned about the Cat People's uncontrollable population growth and savagery, a community of sorcerers eventually banished the entire original Cat People population to a demonic netherworldly realm. Tigra's powers are the result of a combination of science, magic, and mental energy. Her physical appearance is distinctly cat-like. A thick, sleek coat of orange fur with black stripes covers her entire body. She has pointed ears, sharper-than-normal teeth with pronounced upper and lower canines, eyes with enlarged irises and vertically slitted pupils, and retractable claws on her feet and hands instead of nails. Her claws and teeth are sufficiently strong to puncture sheet steel, such as that found in a car body. Tigra also has a long semi-prehensile tail, and can willfully contact (but not grasp and lift) objects with it. Tigra's feline physiology grants her various superhuman attributes including superhuman strength, speed, stamina, agility, reflexes, and resistance to physical injury. If she is injured, her physiology enables her to heal much faster and more extensively than an ordinary human.
"Well, that was impressive," Tony noted as he compared the two steel panels that served as targets, one was dented, the other almost obliterated. "If anything, I think that the projection of a 400% increase in throughput was a bit low."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, doing his level best to refrain from performing a victory dance in the middle of the room. With his father and favorite teacher in the room, there were two too many witnesses for such a display. There was still more testing to do, and he did not have much time to do it, but it looked like he was on the right track.

"Amazing," Steven Strange intoned from his place beside Tony. "I would never have suspected that a metal, even as exotic a metal as vibranium would have such an effect of magic."

"I don't think it would work for you, Dr. Strange," Harry said as he made some notes on the configuration before carefully removing the wand from its aiming jig. "I mean, since you don't use a focus, though we might be able to inlay your gloves with the wire… but I think your gestures and ward signs might disrupt the spell matrixes as they're forming."

Despite his background in medicine, Steven Strange always found himself taken aback when Harry spoke of magic in terms of science. Still, the boy was usually right in these things, so he nodded in agreement. "Well, Tony, you asked me here for a consultation, and it is my opinion that Harry's methodology is sound and his experiments are safe-ish. Should I assume you will be somehow integrating the vibranium into a more permanent configuration?" the Sorcerer Supreme asked gesturing toward the coil of wire mounted on the test frame.

"That's the plan," Harry agreed. "Not sure just how I'm going to do it yet. I mean, I have a few ideas, but I'm not really sure what they will do. I picked up a few spare wands for testing…"

"Just keep us informed," his father laughed. "And try not to destroy anything loadbearing down here."

Harry nodded as the adults left the room, before returning to the book he had been reading before the demonstration trying to absorb as much as he could of the process for inlaying metal into wood.

"Right on time, Mr. Longbottom," the ancient alchemist said as Neville entered the room.

"Good morning, Professor de Ablo, thank you for continuing my lessons."

"I have heard that you made use of my lessons in a most imaginative and productive manner," de
Ablo smiled. "Using animated warriors against alien kidnappers, I'm told."

Neville blinked. "You believe that? Most other people dismissed the idea out of hand."

Mr. Longbottom, I have lived a very long time, and I have learned a great many things. That beings from other worlds might visit for whatever reason is hardly news to me. They have been here before, and they will come again. You were correct to use your talents to teach them that we humans of Earth are not to be trifled with, and I am proud to think that what I taught you might have tipped the balance."

Neville felt himself blushing at that. "I'm ready to get started sir."

"Very good. I have reviewed your grades from the past year, your Potions have improved."

"Yes, sir." Neville nodded. "I think my earlier problems came from how unsettled I was by the Professor who teaches Potions, but after spending time in your classroom, he just isn't all that intimidating anymore."

The old man smiled. "Rarely has a student complimented me so. So, Mr. Longbottom, if you're done wasting our valuable time, we will begin this summer's lessons."

"Yes sir," Neville nodded.

"This summer," de Ablo said, taking his place behind his podium, "we will explore the science and magic behind elemental constructs."

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"Hey, Harry," Franklin said as he dismounted the old Fantasticar carrying an overnight bag. Once he was clear, the empty vehicle lifted from the ground and headed back to the city. "Dad and Mom had something to do today, so I got stuck with the old 'flying bathtub'."

"You know, Frank," Harry laughed. "You and I are probably the only kids in the world who complain about the ultra-high tech methods our parents use to get us from place to place."

"The only thing remotely 'high tech' about that stupid thing is the autopilot and the dock for that god awful H. E. R. B. I. E. robot," Franklin argued.

"Frank, buddy," Harry said as he slung an arm around his oldest friend's neck. "I'm going to have to introduce you to the concept of a city bus, you'll dream about the Flying Bathtub. Besides, I really liked Herbie. He was the Hobbes to your Calvin."

"Are you suggesting that I'm some kind of psychotic maniac?" Franklin asked.

"Well, not necessarily psychotic, but maniac, oh yeah," Harry laughed again as the pair entered the house. "I can give you examples if you want."

"No, I freely admit to being a maniac, but only because you're one too."

"Well, that goes without saying," Harry admitted.

The pair came upon Jarvis directing the staff in preparing a suite of rooms on the second floor. "Can we help?"

"You could get ready to receive visitors," the Stark Family Major Domo suggested.
"That's Jarvis' way of saying I'm a slob and should go get cleaned up before I embarrass him in front of company," Harry explained as he led Franklin away toward his bedroom.

"Quite," Jarvis agreed.

"I'm only dirty because of my morning workout and a couple hours in my workshop," Harry called out as they walked away. "I am a bit smelly," he admitted to Franklin. "Time for a shower."

"So, who's coming?" Franklin asked once they reached Harry's room.

"Don't know," Harry admitted. "When I asked, Dad said 'wait and see'. The last time he did that, it was a visit from Namor."

"Uh, I don't like that guy," Franklin said as he checked himself out in the mirror over Harry's dresser, and judging himself presentable.

"Really?" Harry asked from the bathroom. "Sure, he can be a bit of a jerk sometimes, but he's not really that bad."

"It's not that he's a jerk, even though he is," Franklin explained. "It's just that he sort of had a thing with Mom before she and Dad got married."

Harry stuck his head out of the bathroom. "Seriously?"

"Oh, yeah. Mom and Uncle Johnny got into a fight a couple of years ago and he threw it in her face. They didn't know I was in the next room, and I don't think I've ever heard Mom so mad."

"Yikes," Harry agreed, returning to his shower. "I can't really imagine your Mom with anyone but your Dad. What did she do to Johnny?"

"Well, I didn't see it, but from what I could hear, Mom can make her force fields air tight, if she wants, and that doesn't stop her from yelling at someone inside her force bubble, if she's mad enough."

"Your family is so cool," Harry laughed. "When I hear people talking about them, I'm always amazed when they go on about Ben and Johnny and they never seem to realize that your Mom is the most powerful of them all."

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Hermione made her way off the airplane in something of a foul mood. When her parents had announced their 'working vacation', Hermione had protested their plans for flying first class on the transatlantic flight.

Stuart and Kristine had listened patiently to her concerns, nodded their understanding and placed their reservations. Economy class… for Hermione. The elder Grangers, confident that they had worked hard to earn their luxuries, kept their first class seats.

This was almost exactly not what Hermione had intended. Rather than spending the flight quietly reading next to her parents, Hermione had protested their plans for flying first class on the transatlantic flight.

Stuart and Kristine had listened patiently to her concerns, nodded their understanding and placed their reservations. Economy class… for Hermione. The elder Grangers, confident that they had worked hard to earn their luxuries, kept their first class seats.

This was almost exactly not what Hermione had intended. Rather than spending the flight quietly reading next to her parents, Hermione ended up in the middle seat of three, with a gentleman, who was evidently the world's foremost expert on absolutely everything, in the aisle seat. Said expert spent the entire 9 hours and forty minutes of the flight talking, talking, and talking.

A small part of her mind wondered if this was how her classmates saw her.
An older woman who evidently had a bladder slightly smaller than Hermione's change purse occupied the window seat. Despite of this rather obvious medical defect, the woman spent the entire flight, when she was not on her way to one of the plane's toilets, ordering drinks from the flight attendant. Coffee, tea, fizzy drinks, they all flowed into the woman, only to request an exit moments later, necessitating yet another trip to the loo.

In short, it had been an exceedingly long flight.

Hermione exited the Jet way into the concourse to find her parents waiting for her under the flight arrival monitors, both of them smiling the way they did when they knew that their extremely intelligent daughter might have learned a lesson that she had not been expecting.

"Enjoy the flight, Love?" Kristine asked.

"It was great," Hermione lied, refusing to give them the satisfaction of admitting she had been wrong. "So many interesting people in economy."

"Good to hear," Stuart nodded, not buying it for a minute. "Well, luggage claim and customs it this way," he gestured at a sign over the concourse. "There's supposed to be a car waiting for us."

"Happy's back," Harry announced having spotted the limousine pulling into the mansion's circular driveway through the window of his room. "I guess we'll find out who the visitors are."

"Frikken Namor," Franklin complained.

"Nah, it wouldn't be Namor," Harry laughed. "He wouldn't have needed a car."

"Stupid wings on his ankles," Franklin agreed. "So who is it?" He asked joining Harry at the window.

"Don't know," Harry admitted. "A family looks like. I should head down to do the welcoming thing, since Dad's not here. You coming?"

"This is what Jarvis calls 'The Conservatory' Harry said as he continued with the tour of his home. "We call it the music room, because of the piano and the stereo system."

"This place is huge!" Parvati said looking around the vast room before settling down on one of the room's four sofas.

"Yeah, we don't use it much, my Dad is usually working on a project or two, and I've got a stereo in my room, so it's mostly for parties and company."

"You seemed surprised to see us, Harry," Padma laughed as she settled onto the sofa across from her sister.

"No one as much as dropped a hint," Harry laughed as he sat next to her. "Though Dad did say something about 'evening the odds' when we were arranging for Franklin to spend a couple days.

"So, Franklin," Parvati asked, "what do your parents do?"

Harry laughed at the expression on his friend's face.
"Shut up, Harry," Franklin said as he settled on the same sofa as Parvati. "Laughing boy thinks it's funny when I meet his friends who have no idea who my folks are. My whole life, everyone has known my parents, even people who have never met them. Meeting people who don't know them… well, that's just weird."

"They're famous then?" Padma asked. "Like Harry's father?"

"Way more famous than Dad," Harry laughed again.

"They're heroes," Franklin explained. "The whole family, Mom and Dad, Uncle Ben and Uncle Johnny, they've got powers."

"We've got powers," Parvati said as she transfigured the lamp beside her side of the sofa into an egret, and then back again.

"Parvati!" Padma scolded. "Remember what Daddy said, just because there isn't an underage magic law here, that doesn't mean we need to build bad habits."

"When I go back," Harry said, trying to keep the peace between the sisters, "I usually keep my wand inside my robes until I'm back on the express, just to keep from breaking the rules. Most people around here won't even blink if you start casting, as long as you're not doing anything dangerous, they'll think you're a new hero, showing off."

"Cool," Pavarti nodded. "So, what do you lot do for Muggly fun?"

"Muggly?" Franklin asked.

"She means, no magic," Harry explained. "Well, we've got the grounds for, you know, running around in; we can use some of Dad's prototypes…"

"Pass," Pavarti said. "That sounds too much like school. What else?"

"Well," Franklin temporized, "we could head into the city, tour the Baxter Building, hit an arcade… and these two better not be video games ringers like your buddy Neville,"

"Neville is a prodigy," Harry protested.

"Yeah, right. He destroyed my high score, and his name is still on the stupid machine."

"I'm not sure about an arcade," Padma said hesitantly, attempting to reconcile Neville's stories of his summer visit with the Starks with these new stories. Neville had said something about having been attacked.

"Well," Franklin hesitated, "there's always shopping…"

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Neville ducked as the shaft of animated water shot out, missing his head by scant inches. The Gryffindor rolled to his left avoiding the next attack, rising as he did so, his wand firmly in his hand.

"Why did I think this was a good idea?" he asked himself as he cast every drying charm he knew. Repeatedly he cast before moving to a new position and casting again. The Water Elemental was weakening, but far from out of the fight.

Then it occurred to him, the best way to fight fire was with Water, so it followed that the best way to fight water was with Earth. His wand twirled in his hand, causing a human shaped lump of ground to
stand erect. Neville groped at his belt for a vial, he glanced at it to make sure it was the right color. The glint of blue in his hand put his mind to rest. The red vials animated water elementals and another one of those would likely ruin his already marginal day.

He tossed the blue vial onto the mound of dirt, and then focused on imposing his will on his new creation. The 13 year old could not help but smile as the newly animated Earth elemental started thundering its way toward the rampaging Water construct.

"Oh, dear," Augusta Longbottom said as she looked out on the grounds watching her grandson struggling to bring his creation under control.

"Impressive," de Albo nodded, watching the same scene.

"Are you serious, Esteban?" Augusta asked incredulously. "Neville appears to be fighting for his life," she winced as the Water construct sent another shaft at her dodging grandson. "Are you sure we shouldn't intervene?"

"Intervening would be the very worst thing we could do. It would forever stunt the boy's advancement, blunting his edge. Every new student I've ever had has had an aspect of elemental power that he excelled at, and one that he had to struggle to control," the wizard noted. "For Neville, his favored aspect is Earth. The Earth aspect came to him easily, likely an extension of his interest and talents with plants. Air and Fire came with a bit more effort and focus, but he hasn't managed to maintain control of water for more than a few seconds."

"So, you knew this was going to happen?"

"Suspected more than knew," de Albo laughed. "Your grandson is amazingly focused for his age. His frustration at not having control of the water aspect had me suspecting that he would try to work out his issues beyond the reach of prying eyes. It is the rare student who strikes out on his own like this." He gestured to the boy as he ducked another attack and responded with his own magic. "What has escaped your notice is that he has been almost constantly casting for more than twenty minutes."

"What?" Augusta gasped. "He can't do that!"

"Clearly, he can," de Albo chuckled. "Raw untrained power and an aptitude for alchemy? Young Mr. Longbottom will go far. And look, he's realized the best way to tame his weakness."

Augusta looked down into the yard, "an Earth Golem?"

"Golem?" de Albo sniffed. "Please Augusta; an Elemental is far more than any golem. It seems that Mr. Longbottom had determined that combining the Water Elemental with an Earth Elemental will result in a hybrid."

"A 'mud' Elemental?" Augusta guessed.

"Quite," de Albo agreed as Neville's Earth creation thundered up to and merged itself with the Water creature. "His control of the Earth aspect will stifle the rebellion of the Water aspect nicely."

"Why didn't you just tell him how to do it?"

"I was going to as part of tomorrow's class. I always give my students a chance to explore on their own. Neville is the only the seventh of my students to discover the concept entirely on his own, and the first in most of two hundred years."
The Alchemist looked on with approval as the combined Elemental submitted to the boy. "Yes, I expect great things from young Mr. Longbottom."

"Are you sure this thing is safe?" Padma asked, her hands curled in a tight grip on the armrests of her seat.

"Safe?" Parvati shouted, the wind whipping her hair as she looked over the side. "This is great! Better than a broom even!"


"Not helping!" Padma ground out.

"Helping?" Harry asked incredulously. "Who said I was trying to help? Did you think I'd forgotten about being the 'slow Ravenclaw'?"

"Ignore him Padma," Franklin said with a shake of his head. "My Dad designed this thing to be utterly safe carrying a much heavier load than it is now. The only time this model of the Fantasticar has ever crashed was when it was brought down by an attack, and even then no one was even slightly hurt."

"Dude," Harry interjected, "Your Dad bounces, Johnny can fly, Ben could shrug off a fall from orbit and your Mom has force fields."

"Did I mention that it has ejector seats? I can arrange it so you end up having to walk," Franklin snarked.

"Shutting up now."

"Damn straight," Franklin agreed. "The Fantasticar is perfectly safe, Padma. We'll be landing in about two minutes. I still need to check with my Mom about heading out to go shopping, so I can get you guys a tour of the World Famous Baxter Building."

He paused for a moment surveying the faces of the two girls, "which you two have never heard of. Uncle Johnny is right; we need to fire the team's publicist."

"What's a publicist?" Parvati asked as she settled into her seat.

"Someone who makes sure the world knows about you and what you do," Harry explained.

"Why?" she asked.

"Marketing, mostly," Franklin explained as the flying bathtub started a shallow bank to line up with the landing pad. "My family makes some of our money off things with the Fantastic Four's likeness, and images of the team's equipment. I mean it's not a major portion of the team's income, that comes from Dad's inventions, but it amounts to a nice chunk of change. The Team's publicist makes sure that people know what is available and also makes sure the Team gets their share of the money."

"Ah, like the Harry Potter dolls," Padma nodded, causing Harry to face palm.

"You've got dolls?" Franklin asked, wheeling about to look at Harry.

"We don't want to talk about that. I had nothing to do with it, it was thought up by the manager of my estate and I made some major coin off it. So, just drop it, ok?"
"Parvati," Franklin laughed as the Fantastical landed, "you have to send me one of those dolls. Whatever they cost, I'll cash in my birthday bonds. I NEED one of those dolls."

Harry jumped out of the flying bathtub. "I said drop it."

Franklin helped the girls from the Fantastical and led the group to the elevator. "So," he said conversationally as the doors slid closed and the elevator began its downward descent, "by any chance, are these dolls, anatomically correct?"

This was when Franklin Richards discovered how it felt to be the target of a silencing charm.

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"From Franklin's sign language," Susan Richards laughed, "I'm going to have to assume that you are responsible for his current silence, Harry. Do you think you could stop doing whatever it is you're doing? I was never any good at charades."

Harry smiled and gestured, only the tip of one of his testing wands showing in his hand.

"About time," Franklin complained. "Some people have no sense of humor."

"And some people..." Harry began his retort.

"Boys, that's enough. Company, remember?" Susan scolded gently. "Is someone going to introduce the young ladies?"

"Sorry," Harry said, obviously embarrassed. "This is Padma and Parvati Patil, they're magic users like me, and from my school."

"Welcome to the Baxter Building," the blonde woman said with a smile, "You seem surprised by something, Padma?"

"It's just that you... All the Muggles we've met..." Padma hesitated, "all the normal people we've met seem to be so... at ease with our having magic. That is so different than what we've been told to expect."

"Well, in my work, I've encountered magic users," Susan admitted. "And not just Harry either, occasionally we've come across villains who use magic in their plots and crimes. Besides," the woman smiled slyly just as she faded from view. "I've never really believed that there is any such thing as a 'normal person'."

"You didn't even say an incantation!" Padma said her shock evident.

"This isn't magic," Susan explained. "My powers were caused by the mutagenic property of high orbital cosmic ray exposure." The woman returned to visibility and the two girls felt themselves lifted from the floor. "I can make myself and other people and things invisible, and I have the ability to create force fields."

"That's what we're on?" Parvati asked, looking down and stomping on the invisible platform she and her sister were standing on.

"Yes," Susan nodded, lowering the girls back to the floor. "We all have certain abilities. Yours are magical, and mine just seem to be that way."

"We wanted to take the girls out for lunch and some shopping," Franklin said.
Susan thought for a moment and then nodded. "You'll need some money then," she said crossing to where her purse lay and pulled two twenties from her wallet, then frowning, reconsidered and added two more. "Remember, young man, these girls are visitors here. Take them someplace nice, not one of those nasty street vendor carts you two ruffians like so much."

"Ben and Johnny like them too," Harry said defensively.

"I love Ben and my brother with all my heart, but between them, they have all the class of 3rd graders on a sugar high," Susan sniffed. "It was nice meeting you ladies, have fun in the city, and try to keep these barbarians under control. Be back by five so you can get back to Harry's by five thirty."

Seven hours later, two exhausted young men dragged themselves into their shared bedroom, following Jarvis' suggestion that they should cleanup for dinner.

"Dear god in heaven," Franklin said as he collapsed onto his bed. "I thought shopping with my Mom was bad."

"Yeah," Harry agreed as he entered the bathroom. "I kind of expected it from Parvati, but Padma was almost as bad once we got into Macy's."

"You expected it from Parvati, and you still stuck me with her?" Franklin asked incredulously.

"You weren't stuck with her," Harry laughed over the sound of running water. "Padma and I had sort of started hanging out at the end of the school year."

"Revenge will be mine," Franklin rumbled in his best Victor Von Doom impression. "I will steal your girlfriend. She seems the type to be intrigued by a budding master of time, space, and dimension."

Harry emerged from the bathroom and regarded his best friend with an arched eyebrow. "Master of time, space and dimension?"

"Hey, reality manipulation and full psionic powers here," Franklin laughed. "Master of time, space and dimension describes me perfectly."

"And modest, too," Harry nodded. "That's a long name if you decide to go with that."

"Oh lord I know," Franklin agreed. "There's an annual required seminar at Xavier's about picking a name for your public personae. Right now, I'm leaning toward Psilord."

Harry frowned. "Sounds like a villain name."

"What?" Franklin asked.

"The 'lord' thing," Harry explained. "You know, the baddies are always calling themselves King, or Master, or Lord, like that."

"I hadn't thought of that," the blond boy admitted. "I'll have to think about it some more, I guess. What about you? Still sticking with Pulse?"

Harry shook his head. "No, between my magic and the things I've learned to do with Dad's tech, I think I'm going to end up using Technomage."
"I don't know," Franklin said, "I mean, sure, it fits your power set and all, but don't you think something like The Janitor would fit better?"

"The Janitor?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Well, yeah," Franklin nodded. "I mean, when we team up, I'll win the fight, and then you can use your magic and stuff to clean up the mess."

Harry launched himself across the room at his friend. "I'll clean up your mess!"

The resulting wrestling match resulted in the pair needing to restart their cleanups from scratch.

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"What was fun," Parvati said as she hung her new outfits in the closet of the bedroom she shared with her sister. "Too bad that Franklin boy is such a snooze."

"You've been hanging out with Lavender too much," Padma protested. "For someone brought up in science, Franklin is perfectly nice."

"Well," Parvati said with a small smile. "If you feel that way, we could always swap for tomorrow. You can entertain Franklin, and I'll steal Harry away from you."

"I don't think so," Padma laughed.

"Our first fight over a boy," Parvati mused as she draped one of her new blouses over herself and examined her appearance in the oddly silent mirror. "Too bad you'll lose."

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Franklin Richards picked up his cereal bowl and slurped the remaining milk noisily.

"Classy," Harry commented.

"All too true," Franklin laughed as he stood up and rinsed his bowl in the kitchen sink. "Well, I've got to head out; my ride should be here any time now."

"Thanks for hanging out this week," Harry said. "The girls are going to miss you."

"I can understand that," Franklin laughed. "As irresistible as I am, how could they not?"

"Lucky for them, they're heading to New Salem in a couple of days, so that will probably soften the blow," Harry laughed. "Mistress Harkness arranged for a tour."

"Eh, New Salem," Franklin shook his head. "That's a collection of psychos gifted with new and special kinds of crazy."

"You're prejudiced," Harry noted.

"Getting kidnapped to that place will do that," Franklin agreed. "They kept me out for most of it, but I do remember Mom kicking butt when she came for me. I think that was the first time I understood just how scary Mom can be."

Franklin's watch chimed. "Well that's my ride."

The faint whine of turbo fan thrusters showed the truth to his comment.
"I'll call you sometime next week," Harry called as Franklin exited the house.

"Cool," Franklin called out. "Later, Harry."

Harry smiled and returned to his notes. Turning test wands on the lathe was harder than he had thought it would have been. It had taken him more than fifty tapered dowels before he had been confident enough to try the first of his test wands.

Only to have the wand snap during its fifth revolution. It turned out that the wand core changed the mechanical properties of the wand. That had led him to ordering a box of tapered dowels with their centers cored out.

After much trial and error… so very much error… he had seven of the cored dowels left and four test wands ready for an inlay attempt.

"Good morning, Harry."

Harry looked up from his notes. "Morning, Parvati."

"I'm Padma, Harry."

Harry smiled. "Sure you are. Come off it Parvati, I've lived in the same dorms as Padma for three years now. It will take more than swiping one of her hair hairclips to fool me. You two aren't that much alike."

"We're identical, Harry," Parvati protested.

"Sure you are," Harry laughed again, returning to his notes. "There's cereal in the cupboard if you don't want to wait for breakfast in the dining room."

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"It's so good to see you," Padma said hugging her best friend.

"It's good to be here to be seen," Hermione laughed. "I had no idea we were coming to visit."

"Dad snuck the Patil's visit in on me," Harry pointed out, "but I knew you were coming."

"Good for you Harry," Hermione said, patting Harry on the shoulder.

"We're leaving the day after tomorrow," Parvati pointed out. "We've got a tour of New Salem."

"New Salem?" Hermione asked. "Oh, I'd love to see New Salem."

"We could ask our parents," Parvati suggested, "I'm sure that it wouldn't be a problem…"

"No," Hermione said wistfully, looking over to her parents where they were exchanging their own greetings with Harry's father and the elder Patils. "The purpose of these vacations is to do things with my Mum and Daddy, since I'm gone for so much of the year. As much as I'd like to go, I'd best stay here with them."

Parvati shrugged.

"You have got to see the library," Padma said, taking Hermione by the arm and leading her into the house.
"Hey!" Harry called after them. "It's my library!"

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Greer Nelson stood in her bathroom staring at the stick in her hand, willing it to finish its process and produce a negative result. She moved an errant strand of hair from her eyes as the viewing window produced a +.

Positive.

She moved her right hand to her stomach in an almost instinctive attempt to touch the new life growing inside of her. How was Sirius going to react to this? They had been dating for seven months now, and had been intimate since the start… The Englishman had been telling her that he loved her for weeks now…

How had her birth control failed?

The were-tiger swallowed and squared her shoulders. Sirius deserved to know. Turning, she opened the door.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," he snarked from where he lay on the bed, looking so very delicious. "I was starting to worry… Should we get you a sandbox?"

"That joke wasn't funny the first time you told it Sirius," Greer said as she slid onto the bed beside him.

"It's part of my charm," the Animagus admitted, pulling the test stick from her unresisting fingers. "What's this?"

"It's a test stick," Greer said.

"A 'test stick'?" Sirius laughed. "You muggles have the oddest things. Why would you need a stick that takes tests?"

"The stick doesn't take the test, Sirius," she explained patiently. "It is the test. See that little dimple?"

"The one with the X in it?" He nodded. "Ok, what was the test?"

"That's not an 'X',' Greer sighed. "It's a plus sign. It shows that the test was positive." She paused, seeing the confusion in his eyes, "That stick tells me you're going to be a father."

His all too familiar grin lit up the room. "A father? Me? That can't possibly end well." He examined the stick closely. "Alright Stick, who is going to be the mother?"

"Sirius," Greer whispered. "The test stick says I'm pregnant."

"You're pregnant?" Sirius asked, his grin disappearing.

"I think so, I need to confirm with a doctor, but all the signs are there and the test stick confirms it."

"You're pregnant?" Sirius repeated.

"Yes," she agreed.

"You're pregnant?" Sirius repeated a third time standing up.
"And you're the father," Greer said, her hope evaporating at his reaction to the news.

"A father?" he echoed weakly. "Me?"

Greer's heart broke when Sirius disappeared from the room with a crack.

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"REMUS!" Sirius shouted as he appeared in the parlor of #12 Grimmauld Place.

"Merlin's beard, Sirius," Remus said, closing his book. "Put some trousers on, will you?"

"What?" Sirius asked, looking down in surprise. "Oops, I forgot. Kreacher?"

"Bad, shameless, naked, Master called?" the elf asked when he popped into the room.

"I need a change of clothing,"

"Of course, bad, shameless, naked, Master," Kreacher nodded as he popped away.

"Remus, I had to tell you, I'm going to be a father."

"Is this good news or bad news?" the Were asked.

"Hey," Sirius protested as he accepted his clothing from Kreacher and began to struggle into his trousers.

"With you, Sirius," Remus noted, "it could go either way."

"Of course it's good news," Sirius protested. "Greer just told me. She has a stick."

"A stick?" Remus asked. "Wait, she just told you? Where is she?"

"Her apartment in New York."

"She's in New York? Did she call you?"

"No," Sirius shook his head, clearly wondering what Remus was on about. "I was in bed and she came out of the toilet with her stick and told me, so I came to tell you."

"Her stick?" Remus asked again. "No, never mind. She told you and you portkeyed here to tell me she was pregnant?"

"No, I apparated…" the light suddenly dawned on the Animagus. "From New York. Remus, how did I apparate from New York?"

"I have no idea," Lupin admitted. "Extremely long distance apparition isn't unknown, just very, very rare. Some people think that it has something to do with extreme emotional states, like accidental magic. So, what did you say when she told you?"

"I said…" Sirius's brow furrowed. "I don't think I said anything. I just came here."

"All right, Greer told you she was pregnant, and you disappeared without saying a word to her about how happy you were," Remus pointed out. "How do you suppose she's feeling now?"

"Shit," Sirius said eloquently, before he started patting at the pockets in his clothing. "I don't even have my wand. I have to get to Diagon Alley, I need an international portkey. KREACHER!" Sirius
bolted from the room, screaming the elf's name.

Remus sat for a moment shaking his head. Hearing the door slammed as Sirius left the house, he sighed and reached into a pocket for his Patil/Stark Magitech telephone. Punching the number he had stored for the American Cat woman, he raised the device to his ear.

"Greer? Remus."

"No… No… Calm down." He said after listening to the woman for several seconds. "He didn't leave you. It's your own fault for falling in love with an idiot. Sirius's first reaction was to brag to me about his achievement."

"He apparated."

"Yes, something like teleportation. The trip from New York was a lot farther than his normal range, and he can't get back that way. He's working on getting back to you now. If it's any consolation, James Potter did the same thing when Lily told him she was pregnant with Harry. Well, James was dressed, and he only made it about four hundred miles, but basically the same thing."

"No, don't worry. As soon as he realized what he'd done to you, he started rushing back. I would guess he'll be at your door in a couple of hours at the latest."

"Don't thank me," he protested. "We've been taking care of each other since Hogwarts. It's what friends do."

"Oh, and Greer? Congratulations."

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"So," Harry asked after the Patil family vanished from the front lawn. "What do you want to do now?"

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "I sort of thought that there would be heroes everywhere. I mean, you father finances the Avengers."

"Ah, I see," Harry nodded as he headed back into the house. "You love me for my contacts."

"I don't love you at all, you prat," Hermione protested, following him inside.

"Hm," Harry hummed as he picked up a telephone and dialed a number. "Hey, it's me."

"How rude," Hermione huffed.

"I said I'd call," Harry said, continuing his conversation on the phone. "Mind if we come by?"

"Me and a girl."

"No, a different girl."

Hermione glared at Harry at that comment.

"Ok, we'll be over before lunch,"

"Yes, my treat," Harry said as he hung up the phone.

"And what if I don't want to go anywhere?"
"Then you can stay here, miss lunch, and Frank and I can play some video games," Harry suggested as he left the room.

"Hey Dad," Harry called. "Can Happy give us a ride to the city?"

"I don't see why not," his father answered from deeper inside the house.

Hermione stood with her hands on her hips, while wondering just who 'Frank' might be.

"The Baxter Building?" Hermione asked in wonder, looking up at the building as if she were staring up a Merlin himself. "Frank is Franklin Richards?"

"Yep," Harry laughed. "Get hold of your inner fangirl Hermione, you look like a tourist."

"I am a tourist, you prat!" Hermione pointed out.

"Yeah, that's not obvious at all," her friend said with a big grin.

"And Padma got to see all this last week?"

"No not really," Harry shook his head as he led her into the building's Lobby and waved to Fin Fang Foom, who returned his wave energetically. "About 10 days ago, Padma and Parvati came with Franklin and me on a trip to the city; neither of them was really much interested in the Fantastic Four, so they passed on the tour."

"Oh," she said. "Who were you waving to?"

"The best Chinese Chef in the city," Harry explained. "Maybe we can go there for lunch. He used to be a 30 meter dragon."

"Funny Harry," she sniffed. Why did he always try to take the mickey? "A hand scanner?"

"Yep," Harry agreed as the machine read his palm. "Keeps the riff raff out."

"It let you in," Hermione laughed as she entered the elevator.

"Ok," Harry agreed, pushing the button for the Fantastic Four's reception area. "It keeps most of the riff raff out."

"So, Professor Richards will be here?" Hermione asked.

"Maybe. It's hard to tell with him," Harry explained as the elevator rose. "Sometimes he gets an idea and he's flying to Europe or Antarctica or somewhere like that. Other times he's needed for an emergency consult somewhere."

"But you said…"

"When I spoke with Franklin, all four of the Fantastics were planning to be in residence today," Harry continued.

"What did he say when you told him we'd be coming by?"

"His exact words were 'Oh god, another one?'" Harry laughed. "He and Parvati didn't exactly hit it off."
The elevator doors opened to reveal the reception area. "Greetings Harry Stark," the woman behind the desk said.

"Hi Roberta," Harry responded. "I'm here to visit Franklin, who should be expecting us. This is Hermione Granger."

"Franklin is busy getting yelled at about the state of his room," Johnny Storm said as he entered the reception area. "I'll take them back, Roberta."

"Well this is a revolvin' development," Ben Grimm rumbled.

"What is Ben?" Susan Richards asked.

"This Hermione girl is the first kid to visit that has been more interested in the String Bean than in me," the Thing explained. "Am I losin' my touch?"

"Ben," Susan said patiently, her eyes never straying from the sight of her son and his friends watching Reed's demonstration, "she asked to touch your skin, just like everyone else we've ever met socially, and even had some interesting questions about your dermis, some that I hadn't even thought of before, to tell you the truth. You're just going to have to learn to share your fans with Reed."

"Hmph!" the Thing huffed. "At least she doesn't have the hots for the Matchhead."

"Johnny knows precisely how dead I would kill him if he even thought about looking at a girl her age. I'm more concerned about Franklin," Susan concluded.

"Sue," Ben laughed, "all kids have messy rooms, you've already yelled at him about that."

"Not his room, Ben," Susan sighed. "Look at him. He can't keep his eyes off Harry's little friend."

"Frank's finally noticed girls?" Ben asked, paying closer attention to his favorite nephew.

"He's noticed A girl," Susan corrected her friend. "After the way he acted around the Patil twins, I thought I still had some time before he started acting like a teenager."

"Well that's probably your fault," Ben theorized.

"My fault?"

"Boys like girls that remind them of their mothers," Ben said as he tried mightily not to start laughing. "Franklin apparently likes smart girls. At Xavier's he mooned over Kitty Pryde for a few months before she moved to the UK. Then the smart one of the twins was obviously interested in Harry, so Frank slipped into the whiny sabotaging wingman mode. Now Harry brings over a smart girl that isn't anythin' more than a friend."

Susan blinked. "I can't believe I missed the pattern."

"Yer a mom, Susie," Ben laughed. "Yer not supposed to notice things like that, while those of us who went through all that when we was kids get to laugh at the new victims."

Whatever 'experiment' Reed was demonstrating suddenly detonated in a spectacular manner, causing Harry to start laughing, Hermione to start jumping up and down while applauding, and her darling son to stare vacantly at the exuberant girl.
He had only met the girl two hours before... surely, he couldn't be that smitten already... Could he?

"Thank you for coming, Susan," Tony said from his place at the head of his table. "I wanted Stuart and Kristine to have a chance to meet one of the more 'normal' influences on Harry's life."

"Normal?" Susan asked. "Us?"

"Well, you," Tony laughed. "I don't think I would much enjoy a world where Reed was considered 'normal'."

"I'll have you know, I'm exceedingly normal," Reed disagreed.

Laughter filled the room as the salad was served.

"Ah, luxury," Susan sighed as she began to eat.

"Luxury?" Kristine Granger asked. "I would call this level of service luxury surely, but the media would suggest that this would be somewhat normal for you, Mrs. Richards."

"Oh, please, call me Sue," the blonde laughed. "I was referring to the luxury of normality. In the years we've been married, I think I could count on one hand the number of dinner parties Reed and I have attended that didn't end in disaster, invasion, or the wait staff trying to kill us."

Sue turned to the waiting Jarvis. "You and your staff aren't planning on trying to kill us tonight, are you Jarvis?"

"No, Mrs. Richards," Jarvis responded, "not tonight."

"There you have it," Susan nodded. "A nice quiet night, meeting new people, good food, and no one trying to kill us. Luxury."

"My robots are not that bad!" Reed disagreed. "They hardly ever go on rampages anymore."

"They're laughing again," Harry noted.

"Yeah," Franklin agreed. "That's usually a good sign."

"Good sign of what?" Hermione asked as she reached for her third slice of pizza. Being at Hogwarts for ten months out of the year had taught her to appreciate the luxuries of modern international foods when and where she could. As much as she would have liked having dinner with the adults and perhaps especially with the world famous Mr. Fantastic and Invisible Woman, there was something to be said about friends and good pizza.

It did not hurt that New York Pizza lived up to its reputation.

"A sign that good things are happening," Franklin explained, working very hard at not staring at the girl. "Harry tells me you follow the Hero community, so given who my parents are, you've probably got some idea of what my life can be like sometimes."

"I hadn't really thought of that," Hermione said. "Do you ever wish you had powers? I mean, so that someday there could be a Fantastic Five?"
Franklin and Harry exchanged a look, something that Hermione did not miss. "You do have powers?"

Again, Franklin looked to his best friend, and Harry shrugged in response. His intent was clear, that on its own made Franklin's decision easier. If Harry trusted this girl, how could he not?

"Yeah," he admitted. "It's not really a secret; we just don't talk about it much."

"What are they?" Hermione asked, "A combination of your parents' powers?"

"I wish," Franklin asked.

"Your life would be a lot easier if you stretched invisibly," Harry snarked.

"Then, what can you do?" Hermione insisted. "If you can tell me, I mean."

"I change reality," the younger Richards admitted.

"And he's a Psi," Harry added.

"Yeah, some Psionics is involved, but mostly I change reality."

"Oh," Hermione said thoughtfully, clearly trying to understand why Franklin would be so reticent about having such power. "Can you show me?"

"Oh, good lord, no," Franklin said shaking his head.

"Not without his folks, the Avengers, Shield, and probably Dr. Doom all showing up to find out what was happening," Harry said. For a moment, Hermione thought Harry might be snarking again, but the uncharacteristically serious expression on her friend's face put that notion to bed.

"Ah," she nodded in understanding, "you 'change reality', and I can see how that might attract attention."

"I don't have much control yet," Franklin admitted. "I'm going through training, in carefully controlled situations, but even then, sometimes it gets away from me."

"What do you mean?" she asked cocking her head to the side as she considered someone her age with the power to manipulate the world around him, without the need of a wand

"Well, back in May, I was working with my tutor, and I sort of accidentally made the color blue smell like buttered popcorn."

"That was you?" Harry laughed. "She and Padma blamed it on me."

Hermione ignored Harry's comments to focus on Franklin's admission. "You accidentally made a color have a scent?"

"And I made Brussels sprouts taste like a train whistle, but I don't think anyone noticed. It was only for about five minutes before my tutor figured out what I'd done and helped me fix it," Franklin blushed.

"Some people would say having Brussels sprouts taste like a train whistle would be an improvement," Harry laughed.

"No, I didn't make them taste like a metal steam whistle," Franklin explained. "I make them taste like
the sound of a train whistle."

"And you did this all the way to Scotland?" She demanded, before her eyes widened in realization. "You affected the entire world?"

"Well, yeah… but… Look it's complicated, Dad hasn't quite verified my range yet, but he thinks that when I do my party tricks I might be changing reality throughout the entire universe."

"Well, that was pleasant," Tony Stark said as the limo pulled into the traffic flow leaving the Airport. "I think you had as much fun with the visits as I did," Harry laughed. "I won't deny that having people around who can't bench press a bus was a bit refreshing," Tony admitted. "Should I be concerned that most of your friends are girls?"

"Funny Dad," Harry noted. "I try, Franklin and Hermione seemed to hit it off."

"I thought it was hilarious the way Frank was trying to be all cool about it," Harry said. "It did get me the time I needed to get the vibranium wire inlaid into a couple of my test wands."

"Successful then?"

"Oh, yeah," Harry nodded. "I think I'm almost ready to try it on my primary wand. I'm going to do a few more test runs before I try it but…"

"But what?" Tony asked.

When Harry did not answer, Tony turned to examine his son. The boy was sitting, his eyes wide, and his face expressionless. That triggered all of Tony's danger alarms. Harry was out of body again?

"Happy," Tony said slapping the intercom. "Get us home. Right now."

"Problem boss?"

"Something's happening with Harry," the billionaire said, pulling his son into a protective hug. "Get us home."

"Good evening Mr. Stark."

"Again with the dog and pony show, Madame Webb? I know that you know how to use a telephone; do all of our meetings have to be like this?"

The woman smiled. "Allow an old woman her sense of mystery, Mr. Stark. I have called you here to warn you of impending danger."

"What is it this time?" Harry asked. "Last time you convinced me that I needed to return to Hogwarts. Therefore, I did. What is this year's big secret?"
"The evil wizard has yet to return, though his followers have made an appearance."

"They did?" Harry asked, now intensely interested. "Where? Was anyone hurt?"

"There was a sporting competition in England among the wizards of many nations that ended three days ago. During the celebrations for the end of the competition, a contingent of Voldemort's 'Death Eaters' terrified the crowds. Many were hurt in the panic; a family of mundanes was tortured briefly. No one died, but someone projected a spectral symbol into the sky. Oddly that symbol seemed to frighten the assembled Death Eaters as much as it did the wizards they were abusing."

"A snake intertwining a skull," Harry nodded having read the histories of the Voldemort war. "Voldemort's mark."

"Indeed," she agreed.

"Ok, so something happened at the Quidditch World Cup, which had nothing to do with me, and I was nowhere near the scene. What makes you think this is a danger for me?"

"That attack was simply the precursor to events to come, that most certainly do involve you. There will be a competition of magic and daring."

"Another one besides the World Cup?" Harry asked. "There wasn't even a rumor of something to come after the World Cup. What is it?"

"I… am not sure," the old woman admitted. "The magics involved muddy my sight, but I do know that you are entered into this competition against your will, and will face danger such as you have never known."

"Entered against my will? That stinks of Dumbledore," Harry sniffed. "What is the old man after this time?"

"No, not Dumbledore," Madam Webb disagreed. "While he will attempt to use the situation to his advantage, he is not behind the plot."

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose. "All this psychic stuff gives me a headache. Is there any way to avoid all of this?"

"Not without putting others at risk," the old woman sighed. "Knowing what is to come should give you some advantage."

"If I knew what was coming, sure," Harry agreed. "Unfortunately, all I have is knowledge of being forced into a contest and impending danger."

"Sometimes that is the best one can hope for, Mr. Stark. I do know one other thing, you will have an unexpected ally, and a rival will become a friend."

Well, Harry thought as he closed his eyes and nodded. An unexpected ally and a rival becoming a friend? Clear as mud. "Send me back."

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"Harry?" Tony asked. "Are you alright?"

Harry shook his head to clear it. He was still in the car?

"Madam Web again," he said in way of explanation.
"Doesn't that woman know how to use a telephone?"

"I asked the same thing," Harry laughed happy to find a bit of humor in the situation. "She has a warning. There is going to be some kind of contest at Hogwarts this year, and I'm going to be entered against my will. It's evidently part of a plot by Voldemort."

The billionaire's face went blank the way it did when he was thinking. "And what is your plan to respond to this plot?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "I've only just found out. But, I think I'm going to need to ask to be let out of our agreement concerning my armor. I don't think I can wait until I can understand each subsystem to integrate it into the suit any longer. I'm going to need your help."

"Damn it, Harry. Give me one good reason to let you go back to that school."

"You'd go," Harry said simply.

"And what makes you say that?" Tony demanded.

"You went up against Fin Fang Foom when you knew you'd lose, I mean before he got that job in the Baxter Building."

"Foom was a dragon," Tony pointed out.

"You lost to him after he became a chef too," Harry laughed.

"I still say he's evil and holding a grudge," Tony huffed. "I don't care what he says, a bowl of hot and sour glass noodles isn't supposed to vaporize your sinus cavities."

"And do we need to discuss that you've fought the Hulk, several times and lost."

"I said a good reason," Tony huffed. "Not a list of the more stupid things I've done in my life. And I beat the Hulk that one time."

Harry just grinned at his father.

"Fine," the elder Stark agreed. "I'll help you do your upgrades, but you better believe your little school is going to be subject to more monitoring and oversight than it's had in its entire thousand year history."

"Bombing from orbit isn't the answer for everything," Harry objected.

"It's a good answer for a whole lot of things," Tony disagreed. "And you make a good point; a dedicated satellite over Hogwarts would make me feel better, and that satellite having a few precision kinetic packages would make me feel a lot better."

"There is nothing precise about orbital bombardment," Harry sighed.

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"Harry!" Hermione called from across Platform 9 ¾ as she rushed toward him.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry said as she approached.

"Did Franklin give you a letter for me?" she demanded.
Harry offered his friend a jaundiced look. "You know very well he did, I was in the room when he
told you he had on the phone."

"I was worried you might have forgotten it," she explained.

"It was yesterday morning," Harry noted as the withdrew a folded envelope from the back pocket of
his jeans and held up just beyond her reach.

"It's mine! Give it to me!"

"You and Frank, both," Harry responded, handing the letter over, "are just pathetic."

"Hush you!" Hermione said as she ripped the envelope open and began to read.

"Mr. Stark," an adult's voice interjected.

"Good morning Madam Longbottom," Harry said when he turned to face the woman. "Did you
have a nice summer?"

"I did, please tell your father I was asking after him," the woman said. "Neville, good luck with the
new school year. I hope to hear that your success from last year continues."

"Yes Gran," Neville said dutifully.

Hermione was still reading her multipage letter, so one they were alone Neville nudged Harry. "I
can't wait to show you what Professor de Ablo taught me this summer. What's with Hermione?"

"She visited over the summer, and I stupidly introduced her to Franklin."

"Oh," Neville nodded. "That bad?"

"If you two don't shut up," Hermione said, looking up from her letter, "I'm going to hurt you."

"Yeah," Harry nodded after his slightly psychotic friend returned to her letter. "That bad."

"There you are," a new voice entered the conversation. "I've been looking everywhere; I was starting
to think Jarvis was pulling my leg with his story about a hidden train platform."

The trio of students turned to face the new voice to find a young woman's head sticking through the
brick wall of the station.

"Hello to you too," Harry laughed. "Hermione, Neville, this is Kitty Pryde, a friend of mine from
home. Kitty, this is Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom, friends of mine from school."

The young woman, clad in jeans and a long sleeved tee shirt stepped through the wall as if it was not
there. Perched upon her shoulder was a small…

"Dragon!" Neville said backing away in alarm, groping for his wand.

"What?" Kitty asked in confusion when she noticed that several people had started pointing sticks at
her in a threatening manner. "This is just Lockheed." She reached up to scratch the cat-sized dragon's
head. "He's a big sweetie!"

"Hrmph!" the miniature dragon agreed, a wisp of smoke issuing from its nostrils.

"It's ok everybody!" Harry called out. "Lockheed only looks like a dragon, he isn't one. He's not
"So, Kitty," Harry asked once the crowd had, for the most part, put away their wands, "what was so important you brought your little menace to frighten everyone?"

"Little menace?" Kitty asked in a hurt voice.

"He's tried to flambé me," Harry pointed out. "Twice."

"That's just his way of showing affection," the Mutant girl protested. "Look, Harry, I'm going to be away for a while…"

"Away?"

Leaning closer, Kitty whispered "off planet, big mission."

"They're all 'big missions'," Harry scoffed. "Ok, you're going to be away. And?"

"And Lockheed can't come." "No." Harry shook his head.

"Harry, you know you're one of the few people he really likes," Kitty protested.

"Only because he enjoys ruining my day," Harry pointed out. "Not happening."

"Oh, Harry," Kitty affected a pout, "for me."

"That's not fair."

"I'll send you a picture of me in uniform," her pout deepened and she reached out to life his chin, forcing him to maintain eye contact.

"Totally not fair," Harry protested again. "I've sort of got a girlfriend, this isn't going to work."

"Please, Harry?"

"I'll watch him for you!" Neville volunteered.

"Oh all right," Harry signed. "That little psychopath of yours would probably cook Neville. I'll watch him. But he'd best behave."

"I knew you would," Kitty enthused. "You'll be staying with Harry for a while, Lockie, be a good boy for him."

"Hrmph!" the miniature dragon huffed as he jumped from Kitty's shoulder to Harry's, taking care to ensure his tail bashed into his new caretaker's nose as he settled in to face forward.

"Owe!" Harry yelped as he grasped his nose. "You little jerk!"

"You two play nice, thanks Harry!" With that, Kitty Pryde turned then passed through the brick wall as if it were not there.

"Harry," Neville breathed as he watched the young woman's jean clad butt pass through the wall, "why didn't you introduce me to her last summer? You know all the best people."

"Hrmph!" Lockheed rumbled from Harry's shoulder.
"No one asked your opinion," Harry said to the mini dragon as he started pushing his friends toward the awaiting train. "You best be on your best behavior, or I might let Hagrid take care of you."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Who's Who in this chapter:

H. E. R. B. I. E. - also known as the Humanoid Experimental Robot B-Type Integrated Electronics. A robot created by Reed Richards to watch over his son and his emerging powers. Said powers frequently surged, destroying the then current HERBIE, only to have the robot replaced with updated software and power limiting abilities. Ultimately, the elder Richards determined that power-limiting dampeners that Franklin would wear under his clothing were superior to any robot nanny, so the H. E. R. B. I. E. series was discontinued.

Namor – also known as the Sub-Mariner (real name Namor McKenzie) The mutant son of a human sea captain and a princess of the mythical undersea kingdom of Atlantis (the mechanics of sex between an air breathing human and a water breathing Atlantian have never been explained). Namor possesses the super-strength and aquatic abilities of the Homo mermanus race, as well as the mutant ability of flight (via a pair of feathered wings on each ankle), along with other superhuman powers. Portrayed alternately through the years, as either a good-natured but short-fused superhero, or a hostile invader seeking vengeance for perceived wrongs that misguided surface-dwellers committed against his kingdom. The first known comic book anti hero, the Sub-Mariner has remained a historically important and relatively popular Marvel character. He has served directly as a member of the Avengers, the Fantastic Four, the Invaders, the Defenders, and the X-Men as well as fighting all of them on occasion.

Kitty Pryde – A mutant with has the ability to render herself and anything she touches intangible, which allows her to move through solid objects. This power also disrupts any electrical field she passes through, and lets her simulate levitation. She is a member of the X-Men, and Excalibur, teams of mutant heroes who fight for peace and equality between mutants and humans.

Lockheed - A member of a highly advanced dragon-like extraterrestrial race, who are capable of traveling through space via special astral ships which transport their essences. Their society is similar to insect hives, with the individual being only part of the "Flock." Lockheed resembles a small dragon about the size of a cat. He has purple skin, sharp claws and teeth, two small, curved horns protruding from the back of his head and wings that enable him to fly. He can breathe fire with extreme intensity and is a surprisingly formidable combatant for his size. His mind is immune to telepathic probing, and he is empathic and able to understand human speech. He is also capable of speaking several human languages, but rarely does so.
"Oh my," Padma said as she opened the door to their carriage to find Harry in the midst of a staring contest with what appeared to be a miniature dragon sitting on his lap.

"It's not what it looks like," Neville said. "It's so very much weirder than what it looks like."

"Oh, hi Padma," Harry said, breaking his eye contact with the creature on his lap. "This is Lockheed, he's not a dragon, at least not an Earth dragon. He's from space, and he's a jerk."

"I… see," she said as she entered the compartment, pulling her trunk behind her.

"I've got that," Harry said, standing and dumping the mini-dragon onto the floor.

In retaliation, Lockheed waited until Harry was lifting the heavy trunk onto the storage rack before slapping his tail into the rear of the boy's left knee, causing the knee to collapse and Harry to fall to the floor, pulling the trunk down on top of himself.

Padma just stood round-eyed in her horror of what had just happened.

"Damn it!" Harry swore as he struggled to get out from under Padma's trunk.

"Language Harry," Hermione intoned, never looking up from her letter, now on her third re-reading.

Neville managed to keep from laughing as he lifted the trunk off his friend and put it into the storage rack before helping Harry back to his feet.

"Thanks, Nev," Harry said before turning to face the mini-dragon. "I'm going to change you into something small and fluffy," he growled. "You won't know when, you won't know where, but it's coming, and soon."

"Hrmph!" the miniature dragon scoffed, a wisp of smoke issuing from his nostrils giving a clear impression that his response was something along the line of 'bring it on, mammal."

"Don't give me that you evil little monster," Harry thundered, shoving the dragon aside so he could return to his seat. "When you least expect it, expect it!"

Padma delicately seated herself next to Harry, before speaking. "I assume there is a logical explanation for your little friend being here?"

"I got shanghaied into babysitting the little menace," Harry explained.

"I said I'd do it," Neville interjected.

"And I'm the one who would have had to explain to your Gran what happened when you ended up fricasseed," Harry snorted. "I'm sorry Mrs. Longbottom, but Neville took one look at Kitty's bum
and…"

"Kitty?" Padma asked.

"A friend of Harry's," Hermione said, folding her letter and putting it back into the envelope with a contented sigh. "She showed up with Lockheed there and sweet talked Harry into taking care of him for her. You'll be happy to know that Harry told her that her flirting wouldn't work because he had a girlfriend, sort of."

"Sort of?" Padma asked Harry with a single raised eyebrow.

"Am I in trouble because we haven't really talked about the boyfriend/girlfriend thing and I was being presumptuous, or because I said sort of?" Harry asked.

"Why couldn't it be both?" Hermione asked helpfully.

Lockheed jumped on to Padma's lap, and the cat sized dragon curled up for a nap. "Oh!" the girl exclaimed. "He's... he's so cute."

"Oh, you little jerk," Harry said, prodding the mini-dragon with his forefinger. "When you least expect it... Expect it.

The door slid open and the four students looked up at an ear-piercing squeal.

"A Crumple-Horned Snorkack!" Luna Lovegood shrieked from the doorway before all but diving to kneel on the floor in front of Padma and stroke the miniature dragon on the older girl's lap.

"His name is Lockheed and he's an alien from outer space," Harry corrected her.

"Harry Stark," the strange little blonde said indignantly. "I haven't spent as many years as I have as an amateur cryptobiologist to not recognize a Snorkack when I see him."

"Hrmph!" Lockheed vocalized before rolling over and offering his belly for scratching.

"So, what is your problem with Lockheed anyway, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"He's a jerk," Harry asserted. "And he talks, but only when no one is around but me."

"He talks to you?" Neville asked.

"Not so much to me, as at me," Harry explained, fully aware of how insane he must be sounding. "And no one will believe me."

His friends all nodded.

"Just like now," Harry sighed.

"Harry," Luna said gently, "everyone knows Crumple Horned Snorkacks can't talk. You're being silly."

Yes, Harry reflected. It was going to be a long trip.

"I think you all should know…" Harry said, only to be interrupted as the door opened once again.
"I swear Hannah, you'll be late for your own funeral," Susan Bones said as she entered the Compartment.

"You say that like it would be a bad thing," Hannah responded happily. "We're here aren't we? Hello everyone…" she looked down at the miniature dragon on Padma's lap. "Is that?"

"It's not a dragon," Hermione said. "His name is Lockheed, and he's one of Harry's Hero friends."

"He just looks like a dragon," Padma suggested.

"Nonsense," Luna said from her place on the floor, tickling Lockheed under his chin. "He's a Crumple Horned Snorkack. You can tell by his easily identifiable crumpled horns."

"Whatever he is," Neville interjected as he shoved the newcomer's trunks into the storage racks, "he evidently talks, but only Harry can hear him."

"It's not that only I can hear him, it's that he only speaks when no one else is around."

"Whatever you say Harry," Hannah laughed.

"Ok, listen," Harry said trying to change the subject. "There's going to be some kind of dangerous contest this year, and unless I can stop it, I'm going to be forced to enter."

"A contest?" Neville asked. "What kind of contest?"

"That's a bit of a stretch, Harry," Hermione said doubtfully. "There hasn't been a contest of any significant kind at Hogwarts the whole time we've been at the school."

Hannah and Susan exchanged a look, "Harry," Hannah asked quietly, "are you sure?"

"Of course he's sure," Luna said from her place on the floor petting Lockheed. "It's obvious he's talking about the Triwizard Tournament."

"Triwizard Tournament?" Harry echoed.

"How did you know about that?" Susan demanded. "Auntie Amelia said that it was hush hush and that only those high in the Ministry could be trusted with the knowledge."

"Daddy has an article coming out in next week's Quibbler," Luna said with a shrug. "It tells all about how Minister Fudge is using the Triwizard Tournament to hide his campaign to convert Goblins into pies. I typeset it myself, and corrected all of his mistakes. Daddy is terribly conservative."

Several moments of silence filled the compartment while the inhabitants attempted to digest Luna's story. Hermione then reached into one of her enlarged pockets and withdrew her personal copy of Hogwarts: A History.

"The Triwizard Tournament," she read, "is a famous contest between the schools of Hogwarts, Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons. It originated in 1223 A. D. as a friendly competition between the three schools. Each school took turns hosting the Tournament, which took place every five years. The judges for the Tournament included the heads of the three schools and members of the host nation's magical government."

"The Triwizard Tournament consists of a series of tasks designed to test the champions in many different ways: their magical prowess, their daring, their powers of deduction, and their ability to cope with danger. Cheating was also considered a normal, traditional part of the Tournament."
Hermione looked up from her book, clearly more than slightly disturbed by what she was reading, before she continued. "The contests were extremely dangerous. In 1792, a cockatrice the champions were supposed to be catching went on the rampage and all three school heads were injured. The Tournament was discontinued as the death toll mounted, with the last one taking place at Beaubatons in 1817."

The bushy haired girl shook her head. "They're bringing THIS back?"

"They are," Susan confirmed. "How did you find out about it, Harry, and what makes you think you'll be entered? You're too young; the age limit is going to be 17."

"A seer predicts I'm going to be entered," Harry explained. "And she's annoyingly right a whole lot of the time. I'm hoping letting Dumbledore know about it ahead of time might stop it from happening."

"Hoping, but not counting on it?" Neville asked.

Harry shrugged. "Dumbledore has never been particularly helpful to me," he admitted.

Would you please hurry up, Harry?" Hermione asked looking back toward the coach.

"Quiet woman," Harry responded as he closely examined the carriage's left limber, and removed a small box from the strut. "I'm doing science here."

"And what 'science' are you doing Harry?" Padma asked as she joined him at the front of the carriage.

"After our talk last year about how the carriages moved, I started wondering about that, so I built an accelerometer rig to monitor the motion on the ride from the station," Harry explained, as he manipulated the controls of his device while balancing the miniature dragon on his shoulder.


"You be quiet too," Harry laughed. "The motion study I got off the accelerometer matches a horse drawn carriage almost perfectly."

"And that means… What?" Neville asked.

"That means we're missing something," Harry explained. "If the carriage's movement was completely magical, it would be smooth throughout the range of the spell. But my data shows that the motion is a series of rhythmic jerks, the same as it is when a pair of well-trained, though oddly proportioned, coach horses, pulls a similarly sized carriage."

Harry paused, and then ran his hand down the length of the carriage's left limber. "There are tack fittings here that are invisible. Sort of like traditional horse tack, but…" He traced the tack upwards to the space between the limbers, his hand finally settling on something large and… moving. "Okay, that's just freaky."

Neville's hand joined Harry's on the invisible something. "It's breathing," The Gryffindor said stepping back, "whatever it is. No hair, sort of… leathery."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, pocketing his device and heading toward the castle. After a short hesitation, the others joined him.
"So, what does it mean?" Hannah asked.

"It means an invisible something, or multiple invisible somethings that roughly match the size of a pair of horses are pulling the carriages," Harry explained, packing away his gyroscopic assembly. "Mystery solved."

"Mystery solved?" Hermione asked. "We still don't know what's pulling us."

"No, but we now know something is pulling us," Harry pointed out. "That's what concerned me, really. Was it magic, or was it some kind of magical animal we don't know about? Now we know, it's a magical animal we don't know about. Presumably, someone else will, Hagrid, if no one else. Next time I see him, I'll ask."

"You are so weird," Hermione declared. "I wonder if Luna would know what they are, she's always going on about creatures no one knows about."

"Hello Professor," Harry said as he approached his Head of House.

"Mr. Stark," Flitwick nodded, "why aren't you in the Great Hall… Bloody Hell?" the small man's wand was in his hand in a split second, and the weapon pointed directly at Harry's head.

"Take it easy Professor," Harry laughed gesturing to his shoulder. "This is Lockheed, despite what he looks like, he is not a dragon."

"Not a dragon?" Flitwick asked, his eyes never leaving the cat sized creature. "What do you need, Mr. Stark?"

"I need to see the Headmaster," Harry explained. "It's important."

Filius Flitwick thought for a moment. His first reaction was to tell the boy that the Headmaster was busy, and that he would schedule an appointment in a few days. However, this was the boy who scoffed at the legend of Harry Potter, who stood up to the Wizengamot, who had somehow managed to at least partially defang Severus Snape, who brought him a horcrux to dispose of, and who had been kidnapped into outer space yet had somehow managed to come home.

At some level, he dreaded finding out what this boy might think was important.

"Come with me, Mr. Stark," the small man said.

"Problem Filius?" Looking up from his notes for his welcoming speech, Dumbledore asked as the Charms Master entered his office until he spotted who was accompanying Flitwick into the room. "Mr. Stark?"

Minerva McGonagall's mouth firmed into a hard line, her displeasure at the disruption of her schedule clear.

"Headmaster," the boy nodded. "I believe you are planning on announcing the Triwizard Tournament at the Welcoming Feast?"

Fawkes the Phoenix shot across the room, lighting on the back of the chair Harry was standing in front of craning his long neck to be eye to eye with Lockheed. The two stared at each other for
several seconds before the Phoenix began to sing and the miniature dragon crooned along.

"Oh, great," Harry sighed. "Now you're singing."

The old man's brows rose to his hairline. "I can't say that I've ever seen Fawkes behave like this, Mr. Stark. From his reaction, it's obvious that your little friend isn't a dragon, might you enlighten me as to what it is?"

"He's an alien sapient," Harry explained.

"Dragons are not on the approved pets list, Mr. Stark," McGonagall sniffed.

"As I said, he's not a dragon, he's an alien. He just looks like a dragon," Harry pointed out. "As far as the approved pets list goes, in my time here, I've seen crups, nifflers, tarantulas, at least one hamster, and a rat, and no one had anything to say about any of them. Besides, he's not a pet, he's a fellow sapient."

"And how did you come by the information about the tournament, Mr. Stark?" Dumbledore interrupted, changing the subject. "The fact that we are restarting the Triwizard Tournament is supposed to be almost a state secret."

"I was contacted by a Seer who let me know that I was going to be entered into a contest against my will this year," Harry explained. The security on this event isn't nearly as tight as you apparently think. When I mentioned a contest, a fellow student with links to the popular press supplied the name of the Triwizard."

"Which, of course lead you and your house mates to start researching it," Filius nodded. "I am surprised in your faith in the Seer who contacted you, after you pronounce Divination to be a 'load of crap' during our interview about your elective choices."

"Madam Web has the annoying habit of being right," Harry explained with a sigh. "And Professor Trelawney's reputation precedes her. I'm not a fan of things that cannot be measured, but even I have to admit that it can work."

"But magic cannot really be measured, Harry," Flitwick said gently.

"Of course it can," Harry disagreed. "It's energy, and it has an effect on its environment. There is a lot more to magic that simply manipulating quanta via force of will and stick waving."

The three professors shared an amused glance and Harry fought off the urge to show them the modifications to his wand.

"At any rate, there is a prediction that I will be entered into the Triwizard Tournament, Headmaster," Harry said. "I wanted to deliver this letter from my father concerning that, and to have the chance to state for the record that I will not be entering, I do not want to compete, and that I expect you to prevent such a thing from happening."

"No need to worry, Mr. Stark," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Ample protections will be in place to prevent unauthorized entries, not the least of which is the requirement that the participants be 17."

"You'll have to forgive me, Headmaster," Harry said. "But my life has demonstrated repeatedly that blithe assurances aren't worth the paper they're printed on. I'll say it again. I haven't entered into your tournament, I won't be entering into your tournament, and I expect you to ensure that I am not covertly entered into your tournament."
"Mr. Stark," McGonagall said coldly. "You will show the Headmaster the respect he deserves."

"Professor, a contest with a history of death and destruction is being announced in a few minutes, a Seer with an unfortunate history of accuracy has prophesized that I will be entered. Adding to that, when you consider that a small herd of Death Eaters, a group with no great love for me because the Headmaster broadcasted his theory of how a toddler might go about defeating a Dark Lord, made a public appearance less than three weeks ago after more than a decade of absence... You'll have to forgive me for doubting casual assurances that I have nothing to worry about."

"Your protection will be seen to, Mr. Stark," Dumbledore said calmly. "You have my promise. Now then, I will need to speak with your Seer... Madam Web, I believe you said."

"You don't contact Madam Web," Harry explained. "She contacts you. That being said, there is no reason for you to speak with her Headmaster."

"Mr. Stark, I'm afraid I must insist," the Headmaster demanded. "There are things you are unaware of and anyone who might interfere with your education must be..."

"Headmaster," Harry sighed, "no. Just no. Madam Web has contacted me as needed, and each time while I was home. She offers no distraction from my education, and indeed, if I were honest with you I would tell you that she is the reason I am attending Hogwarts. I turned down the offer that came from Professor McGonagall, and I told you I was not interested, if you recall. It was only after Madam Web contacted me for the first time I was convinced that I needed to come here to study. She has predicted that I will be pulled into the Tournament. I came to you in the hope that you can prevent it. I am hoping that you don't end up disappointing me again."

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Sirius looked about the lounge of his ancestral home and nodded. "You've done an excellent job Tappy."

"Tappy thanks Master for his kindness," the elf said with a bow. "The work progressed much quicker once Kreacher Elf received his reward. Kreacher Elf was very old and could no longer work as an Elf should."

Sirius nodded. "Thank you for explaining that to me," the wizard looked around the room and ran his fingers through his hair. "I just though he was being an evil toerag, I had no idea he was suffering so."

"Master will be bringing Mistress home?" Tappy asked hopefully.

Again, the wizard nodded, regarding the row of shrouded portraits cautiously. "In deed, Tappy, it's time for her to meet the family."

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Padma hummed to herself as she hung her robes in the wardrobe.

"You seem pleased with yourself."

Turning, she found Hermione standing in her doorway, leaning against the jam. "Maybe a little," she admitted.

"Something to do with Harry?"
"Yes," Padma admitted.

"All right, what's going on?" Hermione asked as she entered the room and sat on Padma's bed. "What has Harry done that's made you so happy? Was it when he told his friend Kitty that he had a girlfriend?"

"No, not that," Padma said shaking her head. "Though it didn't hurt. Parvati and I are twins."

"No, really?" Hermione said sarcastically.

"When we were staying with Harry this summer," Padma continued, ignoring Hermione's jibe, "we went out for a day with his friend Franklin and Harry. Just the four of us, and we had a good time."

"And?"

"And Parvati was bored by Franklin and after he left pretended to be me with Harry," Padma explained.

"That wasn't nice," Hermione observed. "I hope you let Harry know."

"I didn't need to," Padma said, a wide smile on her face. "He can tell us apart. Even when she was wearing my things, Harry knew she was Parvati. I've never seen her so angry."

"Well…" Hermione said, clearly confused, "that's nice, I guess."

"You don't understand," Padma sighed. "You don't know what it's like to be a twin, people always unable to tell us apart. Parvati had 'borrowed' some of my jewelry and was masquerading as me, and Harry could tell she wasn't me without me being in the room."

"How could he tell?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know," Padma admitted. "Mum can always tell us apart, but even Daddy can be fooled when Parv does her pretend to be Padma thing. The how does not matter, Hermione, what matters is I have a boyfriend; he doesn't care about my sister who everyone thinks is prettier than I am, and he can tell us apart."

"That's good, I guess," Hermione said.

"I always thought that if I ever had a boyfriend, it would be someone that Parv didn't want," Padma whispered. "I never dreamed it would be someone who wasn't interested in Parvati, but did want me."

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A month into classes, an owl landed in front of Harry at Breakfast.

"Hey, fella," he said, "are you sure you've got the right student? I don't get much mail."

The owl offered a glare that suggested Harry might be insane.

"So, that's a yes, you're very certain you've got the right student, then?" Harry asked laughing at himself. "Well, thank you then, may I?"

The owl offered its left leg, to which was tied a long shipping tube, that Harry was almost certain had not been there when the bird had landed. How did owls transport packages anyway?
Adding another topic to his list of things that needed researching once he had the chance, he reached out and released the owl from its burden.

"Thank you," Harry said. "I feel like I should offer you something, but I don't have any small rodents, would you like a piece of sausage?"

The owl ignored the offering, instead locking its eyes on the rasher of bacon on the boy's plate.

"Ah," Harry said in understanding. "Bacon it is. You are obviously an owl of impeccable taste. Here you go."

The owl accepted the tribute, and took wing to consume it in private in the way of its kind.

Harry shook his head at the near human intelligence that magic had gifted these special animals as he inspected the address label on the shipping tube, and then opened the tube, wondering what Kitty Pryde might have sent him.

Unrolling the contents produced a smile on Harry's face.

"Why do you have a Shadow Cat poster?" Hermione asked settling in the seat next to him.

"That's… indecent!" Padma exclaimed when she caught sight of the poster.

"Kitty sent me a poster as 'payment' for watching Lockheed," Harry explained, wondering where the mini-dragon might have wandered. "And how is this indecent, Padma?" He rolled up the poster and restored it to its shipping tube. "Kitty's covered from head to toe; the only flesh you can see is her eyes, around her mouth and her hair."

"But, that outfit is so tight, you can see everything!" His girlfriend insisted.

"It is fairly graphic, Harry," Hermione agreed. "Are you planning on hanging that up in your room, you perv?"

"Hmm," Harry hummed. "Is that the sound of hypocrisy I hear there, Hermione? Don't forget, I've been to your room at your house, and I've seen your life-sized shirtless poster of Captain Britain. And for the record, no, I'm not going to keep the poster."

"That Captain Britain poster was for charity!" Hermione protested. "Are you giving this one to me?" she asked shyly.

"Fat chance, Ms. Pervert. Hey Neville!"

The Gryffindor diverted from his path to his house table to join the Ravenclaws. "What's up?"

"Here," Harry said extending the shipping tube. "A little something to remember Kitty by."

Neville accepted the tube guardedly. He had far too much experience with 'gifts' from the Weasley twins to avoid being suspicious. "Why would your friend send me anything?" he asked.

"She sent it to me," Harry sighed. "I'm giving it to you, because if I don't, Ms Hypocrite will try to steal it."

"I would not try to steal it!" Hermione protested. "I like Nightcrawler better anyway!"

"Kurt will be happy to hear that," Harry snarked.
"Bloody hell!" Neville gasped after he unrolled the poster.

"Language, Neville," Hermione chastised.

"Yeah, language, Neville," Harry laughed. "You don't want to be offending Ms Pervert."

"Thank you, Harry," Neville said, still examining his newest possession closely. "I mean it, thanks a lot Mate."

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"A house no one can see," Greer said as #12 Grimauld Place appeared before her. "Bill collectors must really hate that."

"It does have its advantages," Sirius admitted as he helped his pregnant wife up the steps. "This has been my family's home for generations, now that you've made an honest man out of me; there are some people you need to meet."

"Sirius," she said as she stepped over the threshold and into the house, "you told me that your parents are dead, that your only living relatives are some cousins."

"Lots of cousins," Sirius admitted, "lots and lots of cousins. Harry says the family trees of Magical Britain resemble a knotted rope, even he and I are cousins a few times removed. That being said, being dead doesn't prevent a magical from meeting new relatives."

"Are we going to have a séance?" Greer asked.

"Nothing so mundane," Sirius laughed. "Besides, séances don't really work. Any ghost will tell you that to speak with those who have passed over you need to control a Hallow."

"Ghosts will tell you?" Greer asked.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, ghosts are real, and magicals can see and speak with them. They are specters who, for whatever reason, haven't passed over to what some call the afterlife, or perhaps, the next great adventure."

"You forgot to tell me?" the woman known to the world as Tigra asked.

"Well, it never really came up," Sirius pointed out. "I'm fairly sure you haven't told me about everything you cat people can do that us normal folk can't."

"Whatever else you are," Greer said affectionately, "normal folk is not a description that anyone would use to describe Sirius Black."

"Ain't I somethin'?" He laughed, leading her into the Parlor, and gently guiding her to stand before a pair of shrouded portraits. "Brace yourself, this could be nasty."

Greer watched as Sirius concentrated for a moment, seemingly centering himself, before he raised his wand and opened the shroud on the leftmost portrait, exposing a sleeping older man with Sirius's features and hair, but his beard was flecked with salt and pepper highlights.

The superhero's eyes widened when the painted man opened his eyes and spoke. "Son," he said simply. "How long has it been?"

"Almost fifteen years Father," Sirius said quietly.
"I see," the man nodded. "So what world ending situation brings you to see me after all this time?"

"A question and some news," Sirius responded.

"News is always welcome," the man nodded. "Ask your question."

"Why was I not disowned?" Sirius asked.

"Disappointed?" the portrait asked.

"Surprised."

"And well you should be," the man laughed. "Your mother insisted that I cast you out, and in her inimitable way made my life ever so interesting when I put her off. Then when that upstart Voldemort who she supported so actively murdered Regulus, my refusal insured that the family would survive the murder of your brother… assuming, of course, you survived your incarceration at Azkaban. Not even Walburga wanted the Black family to fade into the obscurity of Lestrange family or worse yet, the Malfoys. How is it you are free? You seem entirely too young to have served your life sentence."

"The fact that I was innocent is a major part of it," Sirius started.

"Of course you were innocent," Orion Black interrupted. "You would have sooner murdered your mother and me than harm a single hair on the head of James Potter, anyone with any brains at all would know that."

"My unfortunate incarceration aside, I notice that you did not actually answer the question, Father," Sirius pointed out. "Why was I not disowned?"

The elder version of Sirius set his lips into a firm line. "Such disrespect," the portrait said, shaking his head. "You have not change a bit since you were a child. Fine, you wish to know, I will tell you. You are my son, my first-born. I married your mother at the direction of my father, showing a level of obedience that you have never managed at any point in your entire life. I never cared for Walburga, I certainly never loved her, but I did my duty to my family and produced an heir. On that night in April when I took you from the midwife's arms and held you in my own I finally knew what love was. It did not matter what a disappointment you were, you were my son. You will understand this yourself if you ever have a child of your own. No force on Earth, not even your mother's interminable nagging could make me disown my own son."

The portrait's eyes moved to Greer, the young woman felt as if he was looking into her soul. "Is it possible that you have already made this discovery?"

"Father," Sirius said, standing a bit taller, "this is Greer, my wife. Greer, this is my father, Orion Black."

"Greer?" The Portrait asked, with a single raised eyebrow. "I can't say I've ever heard of a witch using that name."

"I'm not a witch, Mr. Black," Greer said, wondering why she did not feel silly about speaking to a painting of a man.

"You bring a Muggle into the Ancient House of Black?" Orion asked incredulously. "If you are trying to kill your mother, you are far too late."

"As attractive an idea as that would have been at one time," Sirius sighed, "that is not why I am here."
I am the head of the family now, a family composed of me. My cousins have all married outside the family; mother's favorite Dark Lord murdered Reggie, my heir until two days ago was my Godson. Our Ancient family was about to die, until this good woman decided that I was worth loving. She is carrying my son. Your heir."

Greer watched as her husband locked eyes with the painting of his father. "Your son?" The painting asked.

"Your heir," Sirius agreed.

"Will you be raising the child in the traditional ways of the family?" Orion demanded.

"Hell, no," Sirius laughed. "The traditional ways has left the family with a single member still bearing the name. Bellatrix allowed herself to be branded like a farm animal and is in prison for life, Narcissa is married to another branded fool who escaped prison only by throwing her dowry money around like water, and Andromeda was expelled from the family because she fell in love. What is it about the family traditions that I should be carrying on?"

Silence filled the room for several moments until the portrait broke it.

"Young woman," the image of Orion Black said. "Do you love this fool?"

"I do," she admitted. "I was as surprised as anyone."

"Lovely," Sirius sighed.

Orion's image returned his attention to Sirius. "For a man who claims he is going to ignore the family's traditions, I find it odd that you sought me out to make this announcement in accordance with the traditions you so disdain. You have always followed your own path, my Son. It is time you told your mother."

"Yeah, I know," Sirius said, looking down at the carpet between his feet. "I don't suppose you could…"

"I could, but I will not," Orion said in tones that offered no doubt. "Watching you tell her, and seeing her joy and reaction to the news will likely be the most fun I've had since I woke up in this frame."

"Fine," Sirius said, raising his wand to open the shroud around his mother's portrait, bracing himself for what was to come.

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"Well," Harry sighed as they made their way back into the castle. "That was a waste of time."

"Oh yes, Harry," Hermione said drily. "Witnessing firsthand the methods of magical travel used by other nations was such a waste of time. You can be so insufferable sometimes."

"Well, it was fairly boring," Padma suggested.

"Hermione, are you trying to tell me that you would have willingly waited an hour and a half in the dark to see a horse drawn carriage," Harry demanded."

"Of course not," Hermione said with a shake of her head.

"Then claiming that witnessing a team of abraxan pulling a carriage was worth your time is just silly," Harry disagreed. "They're horses, pulling a carriage. They have wings and they're freaking
huge, but they're still just horses. I'll grant you that watching Durmstrang's magical submarine surface was moderately interesting, at least what little we could see. If they open the ship to tours and explain their propulsion and navigation charms I'll be first in line, but as it stands, tonight's assembly was hardly worth the wait."

The trio made their way to the Ravenclaw table and took their normal places. Harry was somewhat surprised to see that while the Durmstrang students were unsure about where they should sit, the students from Beauxbatons were joining them at the Ravenclaw table. The French students looked around the Great Hall with glum expressions on their faces. Several of them were still clutching scarves and shawls around their heads.

"It's not that cold," Hermione noted. "Why didn't they bring cloaks?"

"Don't be so hard on them, Hermione," Padma said gently. "From what I understand, Beauxbatons is in the south of France, the weather they're acclimated to is more than a bit warmer than here."

There was a bit of a fuss from over at the Gryffindor table before the Durmstrang students settled themselves at the Slytherin table. From his seat, Harry could see Draco, Vinnie and Greg looking very smug about this for some reason.

"Is this Krum guy someone important?" He asked.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"Everyone seems to be making a fuss over him," Harry noted.

"Are you serious?" the seventh year to his right asked incredulously. "That's Viktor Krum. The Quidditch star."

Harry stared at the older boy blankly. "Professional I take it?"

"How do you not know Viktor Krum?" the older boy demanded.

"I don't follow Quidditch," Harry said with a shrug before returning his attention to the Durmstrang students. "They look to be a lot happier than the Beauxbatons gang," he noted.

The Durmstrang students were pulling off their heavy furs and looking up at the starry black ceiling with expressions of interest; a couple of them were picking up the golden plates and goblets and examining them, apparently impressed.

When all the students had entered the Hall and settled down at their House tables, the staff entered, filing up to the top table and taking their seats. Last in line were Professor Dumbledore, Durmstrang's Professor Karkaroff, and Beauxbatons' Madame Maxime. When their headmistress appeared, the French pupils leapt to their feet. A few of the Hogwarts students laughed at that, but the Beauxbatons party appeared quite unembarrassed, and did not resume their seats until Madame Maxime had taken her seat at Dumbledore's left-hand side. Dumbledore remained standing, and a silence fell over the Great Hall.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and, most particularly, guests," said Dumbledore, beaming around at the foreign students. "I have great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable."

"The tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast," said Dumbledore. "I now invite you all to eat, drink, and make yourselves at home!"
He sat down, and Harry saw Karkaroff lean forward at once and engage him in conversation.

The plates in front of them filled with food as usual. The house-elves in the kitchen seemed to have made every effort to impress; there was a greater variety of dishes in front of them than Harry had ever seen, including several that were definitely not British.

"What's that?" Padma asked, pointing at a large dish of some sort of shellfish stew that stood beside a large steak-and-kidney pudding.

"Bouillabaisse," said Hermione.

"It's not bad," Harry noted, "It will never replace a good steak, but it's not bad."

"If you say so," Padma said, not looking at all convinced as she selected from among her favorites of Hogwarts' normal fare.

For some reason, Harry found this to be hilarious, though he was smart enough not to laugh at his girlfriend's food choices. He resolved to expand her horizons a bit if he got the chance. Not that he himself was very interested in the bouillabaisse.

At that moment, a voice said, "Excuse me, are you wanting the bouillabaisse? There is none at our end of the table."

The speaker was one of the girls from Beauxbatons who had been so bothered by the cold. She had finally removed her scarf; displaying long silvery-blond hair fell almost to her waist. For some reason Harry couldn't help but notice that she had large, deep blue eyes, and very white, even teeth. There was something familiar about her.

It took him a second to regain to realize that no one has answered her. Harry glanced between his friends and the still untouched bouillabaisse.

"Yeah, you can have it," he said, pushing the dish toward the girl.

"You have finished with it?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," Hermione nodded. "You can take it."

The girl picked up the dish and carried it carefully off to her end of the table.

Harry realized he was staring after her, and noticed that most of the rest of the young men in the Great Hall were also watching how she gracefully moved as well.

"Did there seem to be something familiar about that girl?" He asked. "I could swear I've seen her somewhere before."

"She's a Veela." Cho Chang said from two seats to Hermione's right. "I'd heard that they had a Veela in their 7th year there, and look, every boy in this place is staring at her like an idiot."

"Hmm. That sounds like it would be a pain," Harry said, returning to his meal, still trying to remember where he knew the French girl from.

"What do you mean by that?" Hermione asked.

"You've read as much about Veela as I have Hermione," Harry said. "Constant attention from men, near constant hostility from women. That means you could never be sure that any relationship you had was real." He looked over toward the silver haired girl who had taken her seat at the table and
was speaking animatedly with the Beauxbatons students around her. "She seems to have dealt with it, though."

"Should I be concerned that you're that empathic toward the difficulties of being beautiful and desired?" Padma snarked.

"My cross to bear," Harry grinned. "So, a professional Quidditch player and a Veela. I guess I know who my competition will be."

"Your competition?" Cho asked. "Harry, your enthusiasm in cute and all, but there is a minimum age for the tournament. You're too young. It will be a 6th or 7th year, like my Cedric."

"Harry's under a prophecy, Cho," Padma explained. "A seer predicted that he would be entered against his will."

"I let Dumbledore know about the prophecy, and that I wanted nothing to do with the tournament," Harry said. "He's promised that he will keep it from happening. So, I'm planning on ending up in the middle of it."

"That's not very nice, Harry," Hermione pointed out. "What makes you think it will be the Quidditch player and the Veela girl who will be chosen?"

"You saw the fuss his Headmaster was making over him outside, right?" Harry pointed out, "He has front runner written all over him. Moreover, the stand out from Beauxbatons would be the silver haired Veela girl. If this were a movie, the two of them would have been sent down from Central Casting."

"Central Casting?" Cho asked.

"It's a Muggle thing," Hermione said, never turning her attention from Harry. "So this casts you as the hero then?"

"Again," Harry grinned while clutching his right hand to his chest dramatically, "my cross to bear. I'm sure that someday I'll be portrayed on the screen by some heartthrob who will kill himself getting my rugged good looks right."

"Oh, Merlin," Padma said looking to the enchanted ceiling.

"Hey," Hermione laughed, "you're the one dating him."

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"An 'Age Line', Headmaster?" Harry asked from one of the doorways to the Entrance hall. "Seriously? This is your method of dealing with my concerns?"

Dumbledore looked up from his work in surprise. "Mr. Stark," he said in way of greeting. "If I am not very much mistaken, it is past curfew, should you really be out and about in the halls?"

"Apparently, I should," Harry suggested as Professor Flitwick stepped into view. "My Head of House agreed to accompany me to see the Goblet."

"What defenses are you offering beyond your age line Headmaster?" Filius asked.

"An age line is the traditional method of preventing young witches and wizards from magical objects they should avoid, as you well know Filius," Dumbledore said with a grandfatherly smile. "I assure
"Both you and Mr. Stark that it is more than sufficient."

"Uh huh," the boy said, still standing in the doorway. "It's really hilarious that you actually think that I'm worried about a fellow underaged student enrolling me into your tournament."

"You aren't?" the old man asked.

"Not in the slightest. Right now in every common room in the castle there are students plotting to circumvent your age line, not to enter me, but to enter themselves. All because they've bought into the legend you wove for them telling tales of eternal glory and fortune, Headmaster."

"You disagree with the idea of glory, Mr. Stark?" Dumbledore asked.

"Outside of some of the more compulsive among the Ravenclaws," Harry laughed, "not one of them will be able to name the last winner. This will prove to any that think about it that the glory isn't all that eternal."

"And the fortune, Mr. Stark?" Flitwick asked.

"A thousand galleons is a nice chunk of change, but it isn't a fortune, and is hardly worth risking your life for. Still, the whole idea of an age line is hardly an obstacle to anyone who gives the problem a little thought."

"I suspect that you would find it more of an obstacle than you think," Dumbledore sniffed.

"Are you familiar with the Mundane sport basketball, Headmaster?"

"I am aware that it exists, Mr. Stark," Dumbledore nodded. "What is your point?"

"I believe you said that the prospective candidates should write their names on a sheet of parchment and deposit it into the Goblet?" Harry asked, producing a sheet of parchment and scrawling 'Not It' on it sloppily.

"Yes," Dumbledore nodded.

"And I believe you and I can both agree that I am under 17, outside your age line and indeed more than 10 feet from the line, yes?" Stark asked as he wadded the parchment into a tight ball.

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed, wishing the boy would get to his point.

In a flowing move, Harry launched the parchment ball toward the Goblet of Fire. Dumbledore watched in openmouthed shock as the wad of parchment fell directly into the Goblet at the end of its arc.

"Yes!" the boy cheered, "nothing but goblet. I was worried I would miss and spoil my point."

From his robes, Harry drew another sheet of parchment and again scrawled 'Not It' on the sheet. "A method suited those under aged, but not familiar with mundane sports, perhaps?"

Harry crossed the entry hall and drew his wand, with a swirl and flick; a silken thread connected the wall to the tip of his wand. Holding the thread taut, the folded the sheet of parchment in half and tented it over the thread, before slowly walking the away from the wall with his wand held high. The thread stretching behind him, Harry positioned himself on the far side of the room, with the thread passing directly over the flaming Goblet. Once in position, Harry lowered his wand and the parchment slid down the inclined thread until it was directly over the Goblet, when he ended his
spell, causing the thread to vanish and the sheet of parchment to fall into the flames.

"That's two ways of getting something past your age line Headmaster," Harry pointed out. "I could do more if you like. Professor, would you mind putting my name into the Goblet?"

"Why, I wouldn't mind, Mr. Stark," Filius said jovially, "I wouldn't mind at all."

"You've made your point, Mr. Stark," Dumbledore growled. "How do you suggest that we protect the integrity of the process?"

"Well," the boy said tentatively, "rather than simply announce that only those seventeen and older could enter, you could have put that into the International Agreements that control the contest?"

"That might have been the wise thing to do," Dumbledore admitted, "but the decision to exclude those who have yet to reach their majority wasn't made until after the agreements had been agreed to."

"If absolutely nothing else," Harry suggested, "You could station several of the sentient portraits you control around the Goblet as sentries, to monitor for the more obvious methods around your age line."

"And having all entries be inspected by a staff member would prevent Mr. Stark, or any other under age student, from being entered by someone else," Flitwick suggested.

Surrendering to the inevitable, Dumbledore nodded. "Both sensible suggestions. I will be implementing both of them."

"Good," Harry nodded. "My father has already been contacting law firms that practice before the Wizengamot to take up the case if I selected to participate even after all this."

"Which firms has he contacted, Mr. Stark?" Filius asked.

"All of them."

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The room lit only by the light of his laptop, Harry deeply wished he had the time to throw together a decent image search program capable of facial recognition. As it was, he was paging through image after image of young blond women of the appropriate age grouping.

My, but there was a lot of porn.

He reset the filters again to exclude the latest hits leading to distraction. He was not adverse to pornography unto itself, but the mystery that was Fleur Delacour had been nagging at him since he had seen her at dinner.

He knew he had never met the young woman before, but, somehow, he recognized her.

It was annoying.

His returns were bringing in too many strawberry blonds. Tighten the search terms, add 'Blue Eyes', new search.

Another few thousand images presented in thumbnail form. Harry sighed and glanced at his computer's system clock. 2 am. Another four hours he was never going to get back. He moved to close out his session when the fifth thumbnail on the third row caught his eye.
He clicked on it to enlarge the image to full screen, and found himself looking at a photo of Fleur Delacour, dressed in what appeared to be a man's suit, cut to fit a woman, walking down a catwalk while giving off an air of supreme boredom.

Harry nodded and verified the photo's source. The Vanessa Bruno fall line, model: Fleur Delacour. The connection his mind had been looking for was made. While the Patil Twins had been visiting, Parvati had insisted on watching a review of the fall fashions, Harry and Padma had joined her, offering color commentary about the models and how much each of them really wanted a good meal. When Fleur had been on camera, Harry had suggested that she wanted nothing more than a good greasy bacon cheeseburger.

And now, he felt bad about that. And realizing that he could have simply searched for her under her name made him feel particularly stupid.

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Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment as it fluttered in the air.

"The champion for Durmstrang," he read, in a strong, clear voice, "will be Viktor Krum."

"Well, you were right about Krum, Harry," Hermione sniffed. "Though I still don't think your 'central casting' theory was very nice."

"Not interested in being nice, Hermione," Harry explained as Durmstang's headmaster and students congratulated their new champion. Krum rose from the Slytherin table and disappeared through the door into the next chamber.

The applause and conversation died down as everyone's attention was focused again on the goblet, which, seconds later, turned red once more. A second piece of parchment shot out of it, propelled by the flames.

"The champion for Beauxbatons," said Dumbledore after he snatched the parchment from the air, "is Fleur Delacour!"

"Okay," Padma sighed, "Now it's official, he's going to be impossible to live with."

Harry just shook his head as the purported veela got gracefully to her feet, shook back her sheet of silvery blonde hair, and swept up between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables.

When Fleur Delacour had also vanished into the side chamber, silence fell again, but this time it was a silence so stiff with excitement you could almost taste it. The Hogwarts champion next…

The Goblet of Fire turned red once more; sparks showered out of it; the tongue of flame shot high into the air, and at its apex Dumbledore captured the third piece of parchment.

"The Hogwarts champion," he called, "is Cedric Diggory!"

"YES!" Harry cheered loudly, "Take that, Prophecy!"

Harry's outburst earned him a few odd looks before every single Hufflepuff had jumped to his or her feet, screaming and stamping, as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers' table. Indeed, the applause for Cedric went on so long that it was some time before Dumbledore could make himself heard again.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore called happily, as at last the tumult died down. "Well, we now have our
three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real…”

The Headmaster suddenly stopped speaking, and it was apparent to everybody what had distracted him.

The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were flying out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Automatically, it seemed, Dumbledore reached out and snatched the parchment. He held it out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause, during which Dumbledore stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room stared at Dumbledore. Then Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out;

"Harry Stark"

Dumbledore's voice echoed in the newly silent Great Hall as he announced the fourth participant of the Triwizard Tournament.

"Oh, God Damn it!" Harry swore.

"Language, Harry," Hermione admonished him.

Harry set his jaw in anger, as he became the focus of attention in the huge chamber. He slowly stood up, glaring at the Headmaster. "You," he declared in a tone that carried throughout the Great Hall, "had one job. I told you this was going to happen, and you ignored me with your normal meaningless platitudes. I will say it again. I did not enter this contest. I do not want to be in this contest. What do I have to do to get out of it?"

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The three older champions watched in silence as their school Heads and the representatives of Britain's magical government exited the reception room, still arguing furiously, leaving them alone.

"Well," Viktor Krum said after several moments of silence. "At least this will not be boring."

"True," Fleur Delacour agreed, "But I find that I must ask the question, Cedric is it?"

"Yes," Diggory nodded, while trying very hard to remember he had a girlfriend.

"I could not help but notice that you did not appear to be terribly surprised when the Potter boy was selected to join us as a 4th champion," the girl asked innocently. "I know that cheating is a time honored tradition in the Triwizard Tournament, is Hogwarts taking it to a whole new level?"

"Stark," Cedric corrected her, "Never Potter. He's very specific about that. No, as far as I know Hogwarts isn't cheating, and no one was as surprised as I was when I was selected."

"But the Stark boy?" Krum prompted.

"Well..." Cedric hesitated, wondering what he should tell these foreign competitors, before deciding that the truth could not possibly hurt. "He's Harry Stark. I mean he killed a Dark Lord before he was two, everyone knows that. When he was a first year he fought a troll..."

"Impressive," Krum interrupted, "but hardly..."
"Fought a troll, and won," Cedric continued. "I saw the results of that fight, a huge hole was blown out of the side of the castle, and the Aurors carried out the bottom half of the troll, because that was all that was left."

"Half?" Fleur asked incredulously. "What spell did he use?"

"No idea, whatever it was it landed him in the hospital wing for a couple of days," Cedric explained. "Then we found out that he had been tutored by Agatha Harkness, since he was 6 or 7, do you know who she is?"

"Everyone knows Madam Harkness," Viktor breathed.

"Yeah," Cedric agreed. "Then he ended up in front of the Wizengamot for some reason, and the Norse God Thor showed up to tell them to cut it out. The next year he arrived at the train with a giant green woman who all the Muggleborn seemed to know, and just last year he and a collection of his friends ended up being kidnapped by aliens from outer space before they escaped, and returned on their own."

Cedric looked up to see the looks of incredulity in the eyes of his competition. "Look, I know it sounds crazy, but I was there, and I've seen, if not the actual events, then the aftermath of most of it. So, no, I'm not surprised that Harry Stark's name came out of the Goblet. The only thing I found surprising about it is that his wasn't the first name out."

"Perhaps," Fleur allowed, "I shouldn't have called him a 'little boy'."

Albus Dumbledore left the room to get away from the screaming and the threats. A pounding headache had formed behind his eyes an hour before and showed no sign of abating.

"Nothing quite like a meeting of the Wizengamot and the finest legal minds of Magical Britain, eh, Albus?"

Albus looked up in surprise to find Sirius Black lounging with a drink in his hand.

"When Young Harry suggested his adopted father might have hired all of the legal firms that practiced before the Wizengamot I thought he was exaggerating," the old man sighed.

"Harry did exaggerate," Black smirked. "Tony only hired about half the firms. I hired the other half."

"Why?" Albus asked.

"Harry's my godson," Sirius pointed out. "I owe it to him to help protect him as best I can."

"But why are you and Stark doing this?" Albus asked again. "Why not just let Harry compete?"

"Why not just let him compete in a competition intended for students with three years more training than he has?" Black asked incredulously. "In a competition that historically kills the competitors often enough that it was stopped? In a competition where the first task is to retrieve an egg from a nesting dragon?"

"How did you find out about that?" Dumbledore demanded.

"Bagman squeals like a pig if you squeeze hard enough," Sirius shrugged.

"Be that as it may, you cannot release that information to the public," Albus warned. "It would
"I'm fairly sure the so-called integrity of this Tournament was destroyed as soon as Harry was drafted into it against his will," Black said flippantly. "Have you figured out how your safeguards failed yet?"

"No," Dumbledore admitted. "The portraits I stationed to monitor the Goblet saw nothing, a Staff member inspected each entry before it was submitted to the Goblet, and no one saw anything out of the ordinary."

"And of course neither Snape nor Karkaroff are suspects, despite both showing alarming levels of hostility to my Godson, and both being former Death Eaters."

"Severus Snape has my utmost trust," Albus sniffed. "And Igor is…"

"I bet," Black agreed, interrupting the Headmaster with a casual roll of his hand. "The fact remains that we both know that Harry was nowhere near the Goblet, and he didn't enter. Your security failed to protect your student, and you refuse to investigate the two most likely suspects."

Albus did his best to project the air of disappointment that had always been so effective against Black in the past. For all the effect it had, he need not have bothered.

The door opened to his knock.

"Good morning Professor," Sirius Black said with a smile. "You're right on time."

"I haven't been your professor for almost two decades, Sirius," Filius laughed. "Please, call me Filius."

"Hi Sirius," Harry said, as he entered the room, before the boy's face brightened. "Dad! I didn't know you would be here."

Filius could not help but feel that James and Lily would be overjoyed to see the love between the boy and the man he called 'Dad' as the two rushed together for a hug.

"I think this would be the best time to excuse myself," Filius said. "Family business isn't for the eyes and ears of outsiders, after all. I'll be down at the bar until Harry is ready to return to the school."

The other two adults in the room exchanged a look before Sirius shrugged.

"There is no reason for you to leave, Professor," the elder Stark said. "Nothing we're going to discuss here is a secret, and will likely be common knowledge at Hogwarts by the end of the day."

"And besides, it's likely you could answer some questions better than I could," Sirius laughed.

"If you're sure," Filius said, wondering what was going on, but unwilling to ask. "I will stay."

"Harry," Sirius interjected, changing the subject, "You have to compete."

"I figured," Harry sighed.

"The Ministry's Experts," Tony said, making air quotes to emphasize his opinion of said experts, "claim that if you refuse to honestly compete, the magical contract might kill you. I've spoken with Agatha Harkness and she isn't sure. She told me that she doesn't really know what violating a
magical contract will do, but she suggested that it might be best to not take any chances."

"Lovely," Harry said again. "So, I'm against three older, better trained competitors, with a major possible penalty if I don't give it my best effort. Professor, how would the judges react if I were to start doing magic wandlessly by evoking demons and minor gods?"

Filius' eyes went wide at that question. "Are you serious, Mr. Stark?"

"No, that's him," Harry said, pointing to his godfather and heading off the older man making the bad joke, "but yes, I have been trained in that style of magic. It has its uses, and in some ways it is more powerful than wanded magics. Madam Harkness always hated when I used it in front of her."

"I would take her reaction to be the normal response of our society, Mr. Stark," Filius said, hoping he was being clear enough.

"Figures," Harry shook his head.

"On the plus side," Sirius interjected, "we got some concessions."

"Concessions?" Harry asked. "What kind of concessions?"

"Several," his father said with an evil grin. "The first task will require you to take a faux egg from a nesting dragon. The biggest concession we got there is that you can use armor."

"They agreed to that?" Harry asked incredulously.

"No!" Filius shouted. "You can't wear a suit of armor against a dragon! I know the Muggles have stories about knights fighting dragons, but Mr. Stark, that is the surest way to die I know."

Harry and his father shared a private smile, while Sirius attempted to calm Harry's Head of House.

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Harry entered the small classroom, wondering what exactly 'wand weighing' entailed. So far, no one had notice the modifications he had made to his wand, most of those who had paid attention and chosen to comment on them assumed that they were nothing more than the decorative modifications common among school age wizards.

The classroom's desks were stacked in the back of the room, leaving a large space in the middle. In the center of the room, a long table was setup, and covered with a long length of blue velvet. Five chairs had been set behind the velvet-covered desks, with Ludo Bagman was sitting in one of them, talking to an unfamiliar witch in magenta robes.

Viktor Krum was standing in the corner to the right of the door, and offered Harry a nod. Cedric and Fleur were in conversation. The French girl appeared to be a good deal happier than Harry had seen her so far; she kept throwing back her head so that her long silvery hair caught the light. A paunchy man, holding a large black camera that was smoking slightly, was watching Fleur out of the corner of his eye.

Bagman suddenly spotted Harry, got up quickly, and bounded forward.

"Ah, here he is! Champion number four! In you come, Harry, in you come… nothing to worry about, it's just the wand weighing ceremony, and the rest of the judges will be here in a moment…"

"My wand weighs 119.068 grams," Harry said quietly. "Is there a point to this?"
"Grams?" Bagman blinked. "Oh, I see, no, in the Weighing of the Wands we don't actually... well... weigh the wands. We have to check that your wands are fully functional, no problems, you know, as they're your most important tools in the tasks ahead," the fat man explained. "The expert's upstairs now with Dumbledore. Then, there's going to be a little photoshoot. This is Rita Skeeter," he added, gesturing toward the witch in magenta robes. "She's doing a small piece on the tournament for the Daily Prophet..."

"Maybe not that small, Ludo," the reporter said, her eyes on Harry.

The woman's hair was set in elaborate and oddly rigid curls that contrasted oddly with her heavy-jawed face. Jeweled spectacles covered her eyes. The thick fingers clutching her crocodile-skin handbag ended in two-inch nails, painted crimson. There was something about this woman that set off all of Harry's alarms.

"I wonder if I could have a little word with Harry before we start?" she said to Bagman, but still gazing fixedly at Harry. "The youngest champion, you know... to add a bit of color?"

"Certainly!" cried Bagman.

"Nope," Harry said, shaking his head. "Not going to happen." Harry reached into his pocket and extracted a pair of cards, handing the first one to the reporter. "All of my public announcements are coordinated through by my publicist. Contact her." He said.

"That will hardly be necessary," Rita Skeeter said, in a second, she had Harry's upper arm in a surprisingly strong grip, and she was attempting to steer him out of the room again and opening a nearby door.

"We don't want to be in here with all this noise," she said.

"And this card," Harry said passing it to the woman while stubbornly holding his ground, "Is for one of the many law firms under my father employ. Coincidentally, this one specializes in Libel law. You know, the kind that sues reporters for everything they own and ensure they never, ever, make a living writing, ever again?"

That brought the woman up short.

"I... see," she said, giving him a death glare.

"Sorry, Ms. Skeeter," Harry said with a shrug. "Your reputation precedes you. And just in case you get the idea that you can claim that I'm lying about our interview..."

In the air in front of them, Skeeter's face appeared, the image shifting from an expression of surprise to one of anger, "I... see," it said.

"I record pretty much everything around me, all the time," Harry said with a smile. "So, not only will my Solicitors be able to call you a liar, but they'll have proof."

Harry leaned forward and continued in a whisper. "I am the son of a very wealthy man; I've had dealings with the press before. Write all the true stories you want, lie and I'll destroy you. Don't mess with me, Ms. Skeeter."

Before Rita Skeeter could say a word, Albus Dumbledore was standing next to them.

"Dumbledore!" cried Rita Skeeter, with every appearance of delight, and more than a little relief. "How are you?" she said, holding out one of her large, mannish hands to the Headmaster. "I hope
you saw my piece over the summer about the International Confederation of Wizards' Conference?"

"Enthrallingly offensive," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "I particularly enjoyed your
description of me as an antediluvian dingbat."

Rita Skeeter somehow failed to look remotely embarrassed.

"I was just making the point that some of your ideas are a little old-fashioned, Dumbledore, and that
many wizards in the street…"

"I will be delighted to hear the reasoning behind the rudeness, Rita," said Dumbledore, with a
courteous bow and a smile, "but I'm afraid we will have to discuss the matter later. The Weighing of
the Wands is about to start."

Harry moved to join the other champions who were now sitting in chairs near the door, taking his
place next to Cedric. Four of the five judges, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Mr. Crouch,
and Ludo Bagman were all sitting at the central table, while Rita Skeeter settled herself down in a
corner to take notes.

"May I introduce Mr. Ollivander?" said Dumbledore, taking his place at the judges' table and
speaking directly to the champions. "He will be checking your wands to ensure that they are in good
condition before the tournament."

"Mademoiselle Delacour, could we have you first, please?" said Mr. Ollivander, stepping into the
empty space in the middle of the room.

Fleur Delacour swept over to Mr. Ollivander and handed him her wand.

"Hmm…" he said, twirling the wand between his long fingers like a baton and it emitted a number of
pink and gold sparks. Then he held it close to his eyes and examined it carefully.

"Yes," he said quietly, "nine and a half inches… inflexible… rosewood… and containing… dear
me…"

"A hair from the head of a Veela," said Fleur. "One from my grandmother."

Harry nodded at the confirmation that the French girl was a Veela. He made a mental note to tell
Hermione and Padma that Cho had been right.

"Yes," said Mr. Ollivander, "yes, I've never used veela hair myself, of course. I find it makes for
rather temperamental wands… however, to each his own, and if this suits you…"

Ollivander ran his fingers along the wand, apparently checking for scratches or bumps; then he
muttered, "Orchideous!" and a bunch of flowers burst from the wand tip.

"Very well, very well, it's in fine working order," said Mr. Ollivander, scooping up the flowers and
handing them to Fleur with her wand. "Mr. Diggory, you next." Fleur glided back to her seat,
smiling at Cedric as he passed her.

"Ah, now, this is one of mine, isn't it?" said Mr. Ollivander, with much more enthusiasm, as Cedric
handed over his wand. "Yes, I remember it well. Containing a single hair from the tail of a
particularly fine male unicorn… must have been seventeen hands; nearly gored me with his horn
after I plucked his tail. Twelve and a quarter inches… ash… pleasantly springy. It is in fine
condition… You treat it regularly?"
"Polished it last night," said Cedric, grinning.

Ollivander sent a stream of silver smoke rings across the room from the tip of Cedric's wand, pronounced himself satisfied, and then called for Krum.

Viktor Krum got up and ambled the wandmaker in an odd loping gait. He thrust out his wand and stood scowling, with his hands in the pockets of his robes.

"Hmm," said Mr. Ollivander, "this is a Gregorovitch creation, unless I'm much mistaken? A fine wand-maker, though the styling is never quite what I… however…"

He lifted the wand and examined it minutely, turning it repeatedly before his eyes.

"Yes… hornbeam and dragon heartstring?" he shot at Krum, who nodded. "Rather thicker than one usually sees… quite rigid… ten and a quarter inches… Avis!"

The hornbeam wand let off a blast hike a gun, and a number of small, twittering birds flew out of the end and through the open window into the watery sunlight.

"An excellent wand, my compliments to its maker," Ollivander said returning Krum's wand. "Which leaves… Mr. Stark."

Harry rose to his feet and approached the table, handing his wand to Ollivander.

"Merlin's beard," Ollivander exclaimed, his pale eyes suddenly glinting. "What have you done to my wand?"

"My wand," Harry corrected him. "I have made modifications to it to suit my own needs."

"Yes," Ollivander said hesitantly, "Your wand, of course. Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches long, with a fine wire of some unknown metal wound around the grip and spiraling around the shaft. What metal is this Mr. Stark?"

"Wakandan Vibranium," Harry answered, relying on the old man not knowing what Vibranium was, nor that it might come in varieties.

Ollivander spent much longer examining Harry's wand than any of the others. Eventually, he moved to cast with it. A spray of liquid issued from Harry's wand, quickly running out of control, drenching everyone sitting at the judges' table.

Harry snatched the wand away, causing the wine creation spell to stop.

"I couldn't stop it…" a clearly shocked Ollivander said, starring at the drenched tabletop before looking up into Harry's eyes. "What did you do to my wand?"

"My wand," Harry corrected him again.

"Thank you all," Dumbledore interrupted, standing up at the judges' table and attempting, along with the others to clean up the mess. "You may return to your lessons now - or perhaps it would be quicker just to go down to dinner, as they are about to end…"

Feeling that at last something had gone right today, Harry got up to leave, but the man with the black camera jumped up and cleared his throat.

"Photos, Dumbledore, photos!" cried Bagman excitedly. "All the judges and champions, what do you think, Rita?"
"Er… yes, let's do those first," said Rita Skeeter, whose eyes were upon Harry again. "And then perhaps some individual shots."

"Any individual photos will need to be run past my publicist," Harry said quietly.

The photo session took an exceedingly long time, mostly due to the heads of the three schools jockeying for position coupled with the photographer's unending efforts to have Fleur front and center of each of the shots. Finally, they were over.

Harry gathered his things and headed for the door and his dinner, only to find himself joined by the other Champions.

"So," Krum said, "You have Publicist?"

"Since all this started," Harry nodded, "yeah. My Dad thought it would be a good idea after he got a look at the popular press in Magical Britain."

"Very smart," the Durmstang student nodded. "Most Professional Quidditch Players do not bother and end up paying the price. Because I was so young, only 15 when I entered the league, some of the older players decided to… what is the term? Hold my hand? Yes. Hold my hand through my first contract signing. My Publicist has protected me from my stupidity many times."

A flutter of wings announced the arrival of Lockheed. Harry felt the weight settle on his shoulder before turning his head to look the mini-dragon in the eye. "And where have you been?"

"Hrmph!" the mini-dragon responded before turning his attention pointedly toward the two foreign students.

Harry looked to the pair to find them backing away, drawing their wands.

"This is Lockheed," he said, "he's not a dragon, he just looks like one."

"Not a dragon?" Fleur asked, her eyes even wider than normal.

"I had the same reaction the first time I met the little guy," Cedric said. "He followed a pair of the fourth years of my house to our table for breakfast the third day of classes, and we all freaked out. They scolded us for acting like children while rubbing the little guy's belly and feeding him bacon. Lockheed is harmless."

"Hrmph!" Lockheed responded, puffing out a small cloud of smoke.

"Just ignore the little jerk," Harry suggested, "I do. Look, I know I've told all the teachers and government people I could, but I don't remember if I told you guys," Harry said. "I didn't enter into the tournament. I don't want to be here taking attention away from you, and if my Dad's lawyers could have gotten me out of it, I would have been out of your spotlight so fast your heads would have swam."

"So the eternal glory and fortune of the Triwizard Tournament does not appeal to you?" Fleur asked.

"Eternal Glory?" Harry laughed. "You've been listening to our Headmaster. A quick quiz. Who was the winner of the Triwizard in 1812?"

His answer was silence, which caused Harry to nod. "That glory isn't all that eternal is it? Besides
I'm famous enough as it is, and mostly for something I have no memory of. Viktor is world famous for his Quidditch prowess; you, Ms Delacour have been making some extreme waves on the catwalks of the Parisian fashion scene. Cedrick isn't famous yet, but he likely will be, on his own for his own achievements."

"You know about my modeling?" Fleur asked in surprise.

"I saw you on television," Harry explained. "You're hard to miss. As far as fortune goes, a thousand galleons is a nice chunk of change, but it isn't a fortune, and it's certainly not worth dying for."

"The secret," Cedric laughed, "is not to die."

"Is true," Viktor agreed. "Dying would ruin all my sponsorship deals."

"In the legal hoo haa that went on over my being inducted into the tournament, my father found out what was involved in the first task. We're going to have to take an egg from a nesting dragon. And not from this little guy either. A real full sized, likely extremely angry and out for our blood, mother she-dragon."

"Bloody hell," Cedric breathed.

"Yeah, my thought exactly," Harry agreed.

"Why did you tell us?" Viktor demanded.

"Why not?" Harry shrugged. "I know and can prepare. I have no reason to want any of you hurt or killed in this stupid game. I'm proposing a partnership. In the actual games we compete against one another with everything we've got. In preparation for each of the tasks, we cooperate and help each other."

The trio of older students exchanged looks, expressions of indecision etched upon their faces.

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"Mr. Krum?" the Ministry official said from the tent flap. "It's time."

Viktor nodded and rose from the bench. He nodded to Harry and slouched toward the exit.

"Good luck, Viktor," Harry said.

"Thank you, my friend," Krum said as he exited the tent.

All alone in the tent, Harry started up a systems check. He wouldn't power the armor fully until absolutely necessary, but knowing that everything was working before he had to face the dragon was only common sense.

He wondered if the plan was going to work. Several long phone calls to the Baxter Building had presented certain possibilities… now all he had to do was hope that it worked.

He felt much more aware of his body than usual; very aware of the way his heart was pumping fast, and his fingers tingling with fear… yet at the same time, he seemed to be outside himself, seeing the walls of the tent, and hearing the crowd, as though from far away.

"Very daring!" Bagman was yelling, and Harry heard the Chinese Fireball emit a horrible, roaring shriek, while the crowd drew its collective breath. "That's some nerve he's showing… and… yes, he's got the egg!"
Thunderous applause shattered the air; Krum had finished… it would be Harry's turn any moment.

Standing up, Harry noticed that his legs seemed to be made of rubber. He paced back and forth, waiting.

"Mr. Stark?" the Ministry official said from the tent flap. "Your turn."

Harry nodded and made his way to the tent's exit. He paused, drew a deep breath and pulled the flap open. Knowing that leaving the tent meant he would be risking his life beat down on him. Harry was aware that he had risked his life before, but those days, when he and Franklin were running with the Power Pack were more of a game than anything else.

Lacking any other choice, Harry Stark squared his shoulders and exited the tent.

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Year Four – Dragon/Ball

Chapter Summary

The First Task and the Yule Ball

A/N: I do not own Harry Potter. Nor any of the Marvel Comics Characters mentioned herein. But, you knew that.

Harry Potter and the Invincible Technomage

Chapter Twenty-Three - Year Four – Dragon/Ball

"Oh my," Padma whispered when Harry entered the pitch. She clutched Hermione's hand even tighter. "He looks so small compared to the others."

"He's got a plan," Hermione insisted, wishing she sounded more confident.

"Did he tell you what it was?" Padma asked.

"No," the bushy haired girl admitted. "The smart-alecky idiot just said that I couldn't get into trouble for something I didn't know about when I asked. But, he has a plan. He always has a plan."

"I do hope he doesn't hurt the poor Horntail," Luna Lovegood said from Hermione's left. "Harry is usually so nice, but at the end of the day, he's still a boy, and boys tend to be a bit stupid when they're showing off."

"What?" Padma asked. "Who is Harry showing off for?"

"Well, you, of course," the odd third year said matter of factly. "And also for Hermione, and Susan, and Hannah, and Tracey, and the French girl, and even me a little bit. It's a puberty thing. He's planning on showing that he's the Alpha male by defeating the most dangerous of the Dragons without getting hurt."

"You seem awfully certain of that, Luna," Hermione said, grateful for the distraction the younger girl offered.

"Boys are not as mysterious as most girls make them out to be," Luna shrugged. "For the poor dragon's sake, I hope Harry wins quickly."

"What makes you say that?" Padma asked, unable to take her eyes off her boyfriend as he now approached the dragon.

"Well, if Harry ends up in danger," Luna said, pointing down the stands to where Neville stood in the stands near the area where the champions would emerge once they had their prizes, "the poor mother dragon will end up having to face a very angry alchemist, and that just wouldn't be fair. Oh, look, he's started."
Barty Crouch Jr. narrowed his eyes from his vantage point in the stands. How did the Potter boy end up facing the Horntail?

This was most specifically not the plan. His Master would be most displeased if the child ended up so badly hurt he could not complete the tasks, or worse, dead. The Potter boy was his Master’s most favored subject for fueling his rebirth. Any of the Champions would do, but the Dark Lord wanted Potter.

If only the boy had not rebuffed his every attempt to offer advice… He raised his flask to his lips for a quick sip. Only long exposure to the vile brew allowed Crouch to keep any indication of distaste from appearing on his face.

What was the boy doing? He had not even drawn his wand?

Harry made his way to the spot marked off as his starting point, trying to ignore the hundreds of faces staring down at him from stands.

The Horntail, at the other end of the enclosure, crouched low over her clutch of eggs, her wings half-furled, her evil, yellow eyes upon him, a monstrous, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, leaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground. The crowd was making a great deal of noise, but whether friendly or not, Harry did not know or care.

A mental command caused his armor, no longer a techsuit, but actual armor to power up its primary systems. Without the helmet activated, a thin filament extended from the armor’s collar to project the heads up display directly into his eyes. All systems reported optimal functionality. Other than his enhanced wand, his magical weapons were not ready yet, but the more conventional Starktech offensive suite was his to command.

It was time to do what he had to do… to focus his mind, entirely and absolutely, upon the thing that was his first, but not only, choice for dealing with the dragon. It was time to find out if all those phone calls to the Golden Dragon in New York were worth the effort.

If nothing else, he had made Foom laugh. How many people could say that?

From a pocket, he withdrew the scroll Foom had sent him. If this worked, he was going to owe the world's only Buddhist Dragon Chef the biggest tip ever.

Sliding his thumb over the seal, the scroll unrolled.

Minerva McGonagall stood with her fellow teachers outside Poppy Pomfrey's medical tent. Having had Harry Stark in her classes for three full years, she knew he was capable of surprising them all.

"What is that idiot boy doing?"

"He appears to be unfurling some sort of banner, Alastor," Filius said quietly. "I'm not sure why he would be doing that, though."
"Why the bloody fucking hell would he be waving a damned flag at a dragon?" the scarred man demanded. "He doesn't even have his wand drawn."

"Alastor!" Minerva scolded, "Language!"

Minerva would never admit to wondering the same thing, in much the same language.

The golden banner fluttered in the wind, the red lettering showing clearly, even up into the stands. Not that it made that much difference to the vast majority of the audience.

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"Oh, my," Cho said from three seats in front of Padma.

"No way," Su Li agreed from behind Hermione.

"Well, that is a risky way to go about it," Luna mused.

"What?" Padma demanded. "What does it mean?"

"It roughly translates to Dragon Protection," Su explained.

"The banner is saying that Harry is under the protection of the King of the Dragons," Luna interjected. "If the Horntail believes it, Harry's task is over. If not, then it will only be over when one of them are dead. Dragons hate it when someone falsely claim's Foom's protection."

"How do you know that?" Su demanded.


The Horntail blinked owlishly at Foom's banner. Taking that as a good sign, Harry swallowed and cautiously planted the banner's staff into the ground before walking toward the nest and the huge dragon standing astride it. Once he reached the nest, the Horntail, never taking her eyes off Harry, slowly backed off.

Looking into the nest, he found six large eggs, the color and consistency of concrete, and a single golden egg, his goal.

"The gold one doesn't belong," Harry said slowly, enunciating each word carefully. The Horntail gave no indication that she understood him, which was more than a little disconcerting. At this range if she used her fire breath on him, there would be no time to raise the helmet. "I explained the situation to Foom, he gave me his blessings. I'll not bother your eggs, but remove the false egg."

Carefully, slowly, he knelt down, lifted the golden egg, and then stood up again, holding his prize out for the dragon to inspect.

The nesting mother sniffed loudly at the metallic egg, her long, forked, tongue flicking out to taste it. Once she seemed to be satisfied, she nodded once. Harry slowly backed away from the nest, maintaining eye contact the whole time.

Upon reaching the banner, he reactivated the seals on Foom's banner, and pocketed the scroll. He then turned and walked to the finishing point where the Hogswarts professors waited.
It was only then Harry realized that the entire stadium had gone silent, and Flitwick, McGonagall and Moody were all standing behind the finishing point, staring at him, their mouths open in shock.

"What?" He asked.

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Thirty minutes later the four champions were still waiting.

"I do not understand," Fleur said, "None of the other scores took so long to post."

Cedric nodded. "I think mine was the longest, and rightfully so," he reached up to scratch his left arm, but thought better of it when he encountered the burn balm his entire left side was slathered in. "Taking half an hour to post Harry's score is just patently unfair."

"From the looks of things," Harry said gesturing toward the Judges' station, "there is something of a spirited discussion about my technique. Do you think it would help or hurt if I were to tell them I don't care about their points?"

"You should care," Fleur disagreed. "Confusing the dragon with a flag the way you did was ingenious."

"Oh, there was no confusion," Harry pointed out. "The Horntail recognized Foom's Banner. If I had tried to fake it, it would have been a fight to the death."

"Foom?" Cedric asked.

"Fin Fang Foom, the King of all Dragons," Harry explained.

"Dragons have a king?" Fleur asked.

"Well, that's the human term," Harry admitted. "Foom is their supreme unquestioned leader. Humanity doesn't really have an equivalent."

"But…" Fleur hesitated, "dragons are unthinking beasts."

"Beast and creature are unfortunate terms to throw around," Harry cautioned. "There are those who would classify Veela as creatures for example. Dragons have their own ways about them. Their ways are simply alien to us. My friend Franklin and I have spent quite a few afternoons in Foom's restaurant, if there weren't any customers, he would tell us stories of how dragons used to live before people were everywhere."

The Hufflepuff and the French girl exchanged a look of concern. Had the pressures of the tournament gotten to the youngest competitor? "Foom's Restaurant?" Cedric asked gently.

Harry nodded, smiling. "Yeah, I know, it sounds crazy. Foom is immortal, and he's gotten tired of fighting all the time. A while back, he converted to Buddhism, and he's become a chef. Nevertheless, he can still be conned into telling some kids his stories on a slow day. And he makes the most killer pork fried rice in the city."

"Harry?" Viktor asked. "Do you have a moment?"

"Sure, Viktor," Harry said as he stood up. "What's up?"

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Krum led Harry to a secluded back corner of the fenced off Champions' waiting area where a nondescript man waited.

"Harry, this is my Godfather," Viktor said simply, in way of introduction. "He has asked to speak with you."

"Thank you, Viktor," the man said, the dismissal was clear in his voice.

Harry noticed that Krum wanted to protest, but did not. What was it about this… featureless man that had the professional athlete so cowed? "How can I help you, sir?" Harry asked.

The man smiled… he did smile, didn't he? It was so hard to tell. "I wanted to compliment you on using the Protection of Foom in the challenge. When Victor approached me for ideas about the best ways to face the dragon, reaching out to Foom never occurred to me."

Harry gave up on discerning the man's features, concentrating instead on his clothing. Grey robes of no notable style. He could not make out the fabric or any stitching. "Desperate times called for desperate measures, sir," Harry admitted. "When I spoke with him, Foom couldn't guarantee that a European Dragon would even recognize his banner, but short of doing something that might end up hurting a nesting mother, I thought it was worth the risk."

"You seem distracted," the man noted.

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry answered honestly. "I'm finding you to be hard to look at. It is as if your features are… Are you under some sort of glamor, sir?"

Krum's Godfather threw his head back and laughed, yet even this did not appear to attract any attention from anyone else in the champion's enclosure. "Well done, Mr. Stark. It's rare that anyone ever says anything. I don't know if that's because they do not notice, or if they are too frightened to mention it."

The glamor shimmered for a moment then was gone; a gunmetal grey armored mask and a green cloak replaced the indistinct features and grey robes.

Harry's eyes went wide in horror, and he took an involuntary step backward, stopping only when his spine pressed up against the fence.

"Shit!"

"Language, Mr. Stark," the Tyrant of Latveria scolded gently. "I'm sure your father taught you better than that."

"Wha..." Harry swallowed hard, trying, and failing, to calm himself. Doom was so utterly out of his league it was not funny. "What do you want?"

"Mr. Stark," Doom laughed. "If I wished you harm, you would be harmed. You would not have been able to stop me, not with your magic, not with your amusing armor, not even with whatever it is you've done to your wand to so increase its ability to channel magic. I am here to ask you a simple question."

A glimmer of hope blossomed in Harry's mind. He pushed it away and stayed on guard. "Ask."

"Did you connive to be part of this contest?"
"What?" Harry asked incredulously. That was quite literally the last thing he expected to hear from Viktor Von Doom. "No. Hell no. Dad spent a fortune trying to get me out of it. There is a terrorist group called the Death Eaters, they followed the Maniac who killed my birth parents. I believe I was entered into this tournament as part of a plot to somehow bring their leader back."

Doom nodded. "I had heard rumors to that effect."

"Is Viktor really your Godson?" Harry asked in spite of himself.

"And my namesake," Doom agreed. "Not something I advertise. I would be most unhappy if that were to become public knowledge. That said, Viktor is a proud young man, you will not hold back against him. You will compete against him with everything you have. Should you fail to do so, I would likely become quite unhappy with you."

The glamor reasserted itself around the armored man as he turned and walked away.

Once Doom was out of sight, Harry leaned back against the fence behind him, his hands on his knees and looked down to inspect his uniform. Then he started silently thanking God that he had not lost control of his bladder in front of Dr. Doom.

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"Igor," the nondescript man called from the edges of the ongoing argument between the Judges. Karkaroff looked down from his ongoing exchange with Olympe Maxime, only to stiffen when he saw who was calling his name.

"I must go," the Durmstang Headmaster said, "A member of my board wants to speak with me, no doubt to lodge his concerns about this travesty."

Without waiting acknowledgement, Karkaroff exited the Judges' area and followed the grey man to a private area.

"Yes, My Lord?" He asked.

"What is the hold up with the Stark boy's scores, Igor?" Doom asked quietly. "Should I assume that you are being you?"

"This is a contest of magical skill and knowledge," Karkaroff said. "All the boy did was wave a flag."

"A flag with the power to cow a fully-grown dragon…" Doom pointed out. "Unlike you, he was aware of this. That sounds like magical knowledge to me, and if I believe that, so do you. Do you understand me Igor?"

"But… Viktor…" the Headmaster stuttered.

"Viktor is more than capable of winning or losing on his own without your assistance," Doom said dismissively. "You will score all of the events fairly, or you will answer to me. For this first task, Durmstang awards young Mr. Stark full marks."

"Full marks?" Igor echoed.

"I am not in the habit of repeating myself, Igor," Doom said quietly. "Never question me again."

"Yes, My Lord," Karkaroff whispered.
"And Igor, if you receive any indication that your former master is returning, any indication at all, you will let me know."

"Of course, Master," Karkaroff nodded, unable to resist grasping his left forearm.

"There is an obvious plot involving the Stark boy and this contest," Doom said. "There is a chance that Viktor might be pulled into the plot. I will not tolerate this."

"I cannot believe you," Hermione scolded. "Trying to get by a dragon by waving a flag at it."

"Okay," Harry said, holding Padma's hand as they made their way to dinner. "Two things. First, it was a banner, not a flag, there is a difference, and secondly, it worked. You will notice that of the four Champions, I am the one uninjured. No broken bones, no burns, I didn't even rip my tournament uniform. Crazy plans that work aren't crazy. That has to count for something."

"I just wish you'd told us what you were doing," Padma said.

"I thought about it," Harry admitted. "But crazy plans are crazy before they work, and you two were already worried. I didn't see any reason to add a whole lot of crazy to your worries."

"Where did you even come up with that banner idea from?" Hermione demanded. "I've been through every book on Dragon Lore in the library and there is nothing on anything like that in any of them." She intentionally did not mention the Big Book of Dragon Lore she had ordered from Quibbler publishing via Luna while they had been waiting for Harry's scores to post.

"Oh, I got it from Fin Fang Foom," Harry said casually.

"Who?" Padma asked.

"The King of the Dragons," Harry explained. "Well, not king really, that's a human term. Foom is their undisputed ruler, I'm not sure if he has a title."

"Are you claiming to know the Supreme Dragon?" Hermione asked; a touch of hysteria showing in her voice.

"Well, yeah," Harry nodded. "I tried to introduce you when you were in New York, but you were too busy playing footsie with Frank and watching his dad blow stuff up to want to go for Chinese food…"

"The chef of the restaurant on the ground floor of the Baxter Building?" Hermione gasped. "You were serious?"

"Of course, I was serious," Harry said, clearly confused. "How could claiming that a dragon had converted to Buddhism and become a chef even be a joke, anyhow?"

The trio had reached the entrance to the Great Hall, Harry stood to the side so that the girls could enter.

"Harry?"

The trio turned to find Viktor Krum standing in a darkened corner. "Might I have a word?"

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Harry followed Viktor into the same room where the Champions first been assembled back on Halloween, closing the door behind him.

"I am sorry," the professional Seeker said, looking down at his feet. "I know my Godfather can be… intimidating. I would have warned you, but he insisted on seeing you immediately… and he is not only my Godfather, he is also my King. He must be obeyed."

"I'd wondered about that," Harry nodded. "Not really Bulgarian then?"

"On my mother's side, yes," Krum admitted. "Dual citizenship, you see. Latveria is pariah state, many athletes use dual citizenship in order to play in the world. So, you are not angry about me surprising you with… Doom?"

"Well," Harry said as he sat on one of the tables, "at first I was going to track you down and scream 'What the Hell?' at you for a couple of hours, but after I calmed down, I figured out that to you, he wasn't Dr. Doom, he was your Godfather. I didn't even think about him being your king on top of that."

"When my Godfather told me who you were, it took me several moments of reflection to realize that you see your father as your father, not as the criminal terrorist Ironman."

Harry blinked at that. He had not realized that Doom knew that his Dad and Ironman was the same guy. Though, it wasn't really surprising that someone with Doom's assets would know. "Perspective, I guess. Are we okay?"

"Yes," the larger teen agreed with a lopsided smile. "Someday I would like to visit New York and meet the King of the Dragons who chooses to live as a man, and to have a friend to do the introductions would be convenient. Besides, Krum will be winning the tournament."

"Well," Harry grinned, "As the current first place, I'll wish you luck then, though I wouldn't count Fleur and Cedric out of the competition. Want to go grab some dinner?"

"In a moment, I have favor to ask," Krum became interested in his shoes again. "Your friend, the girl with the large hair… He-rom-noy? No, is wrong. I do not know how to pronounce her name."

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Her-mi-oh-ne," Krum repeated, obviously attempting to get the pronunciation of the unfamiliar name down. "Could you introduce us?"

"Why?" Harry asked.

"I am… Celebrity," Krum said cautiously. "Many fans at Durmstang, and even at Hogwarts and Beauxbatons. Everywhere I go, women and girls follow me. I have studied English, for year to prepare for this tournament, I speak well, but reading for classes is still hard. When I ask for help, I get… mobbed."

Krum paused for a moment before continuing. "You are as famous as I, and attract almost as much attention, but your friends do not care, Her-mi-oh-ne especially is not impressed by your fame, and she does not care about Quidditch, I was hoping she would help me with studies."

Harry regarded his competitor for a moment. "I know a few boys in Ravenclaw who don't care about Quidditch who could help you with the books; would you like to meet them as well?"

He could not help but smile at Krum's silence. "Okay, you dog, so it's more than studying you're
interested in. Isn't Hermione a bit young for you?"

"No!" Krum protested just a bit too loudly. "I worry about that, so I ask. She turned 15 in September. I turned 17 in August. Only 2 years between us."

Harry paused for a moment, wondering if he should mention Hermione's budding romance with Franklin. Then he remembered the summer before when he had suggested, asked, pleaded and ultimately begged Franklin to take Parvati out so that he and Padma could manage some alone time, only to be laughed at. Moreover, Hermione had been spectacularly slow on the uptake when he and Padma had tried to have dates on both of the Hogsmeade weekends so far this year.

Harry decided it would be funnier to watch the fireworks that occurred when the son of Reed Richards and the Godson of Viktor Von Doom ended up competing for the attentions of the same young woman safely from the sidelines. Still…

"You know she is Mundane…, I mean, Muggleborn, right?" Harry asked.

"Means nothing," Krum said with a shrug.

"You're sure?" Harry pressed.

"Stupid rule," Viktor said, waving his hand dismissively. "My Godfather knows more magic than any of the staff, and cannot use a wand. Some look done their noses at him, but only in silence, for they fear his power. Her-mi-oh-ne is smart, pretty, and does not care about the nonsense of your life. I hope she does not care about the nonsense of mine."

"Okay," Harry laughed. That had been the best answer he could hope for. "Let's head to dinner, sit with us, and I'll introduce you around to everyone."

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After dinner on November the 28th, Tracey hesitated outside the unused classroom that their group had been using for their OWL project. She was early, as was her habit, but was now reconsidering her choice. Harry was almost always early as well, but she had not been alone with him since she had ended their relationship and perhaps their friendship.

She steeled herself and opened the door.

And of course, he was there, fussing with an array of silver panels and attachments. He looked up from his task and smiled. "Hi Tracey."

"Hello, Harry," she said. "Have you got it working?"

"After a fashion," he admitted with a grin. "It's one of the things we need to talk about tonight."

"Hermione and I haven't made much progress in getting the memory to work," she noted. Tracey crossed the room to look at the example he had set up on the table.

"Yeah," Harry nodded, "I read the summary you wrote up. There must be a reason that the runic arrays break down after 80 read cycles. We'll figure it out. Zabini's report on the long-term storage suggests that they're not doing well either. We'll need to discuss all of that."

"So, the only thing that works is the processor that you and Padma put together, and the display that Greengrass and Bulstrode are adapting from the Ravenclaw Reader?"
"Hardly," Harry laughed. "The plans called for an 8-bit processor for the prototype. This 4-bit beast is the best we've managed to get working."

"Thank you all for coming," Harry said once the last of the group arrived. "And I'm sorry it's taken me so long to call the first meeting for the year, but this stupid Tournament had taken up so much of my time."

"I was starting to get worried," Kevin Entwhistle snarked. "Our grades are on the line in this too, you know."

"As usual, your altruism knows no bounds, Kevin," Stark deadpanned right back. "Okay, this is what we've got;" he said, activating the prototype in front of him. The display crackled into life to show 'HELLO WORLD'.

"So, our status at this point in 4th year," Harry sighed. "Our best functional prototype processor maxes out at four bits. Not sure why, Padma and I worked on it over the summer and every time we tried to take it to 8-bit, we had a cascade failure in the output registers. We're missing something important, that much is clear."

"Daphne and Millie's work on adapting the Ravenclaw Reader's display to our needs is the bright point of our status report. It appears to be working without any issues at all. Thank you, ladies. Hopefully the work you did on the display registers will be useful on the other problems we're having."

"Both the Long-Term Storage and Random-Access Memory are disasters," Harry continued. "The RAM appears to work fine for the first 80 read cycles, and then the runic patterns actually break down."

"Break down?" Su Li asked.

"The etchings in the aluminum,"

"Aluminium," Hermione corrected.

"Yes, aluminium, thank you Hermione," Harry sighed, "the etchings in the aluminium over heat and slag. The runes are for all practical purposes erased from the substrate. It's a mess, and we're going to have to fall back to the beginning to fix it."

"And finally, the long-term storage is working fine as long as it is powered. The array loses its data either upon power down or upon reapplication of power, Blaise's group hasn't figured out which yet."

Silence filled the room for several moments.

"That's where we are on the project," Harry continued. "To add to all of this, with the stupid Tournament, I'm going to be too busy to be much help this year. So, I've got a suggestion for the group."

"What is it, Harry?" Daphne asked, "I know the professors said that a failed project with good methodology could pass, but I really don't want to test that theory."

"And I agree with you," Harry nodded. "When we started this, I told you we would have a backup project in case we had bitten off more than we could chew, and with our rampaging string of failure,
it's starting to look like we might have. With what we've got right now, the functioning 4-bit processor and working display, we could rework it to deliver the calculator."

"So, we give up on the computer?" Kevin asked.

"No, not at all, we've still got most of two years after all, but having the Calculator as a finished product will take the pressure off."

"That's a good idea," Su Li nodded. "Are you going to have time to continue being the team leader with the tournament?"

"No, I don't think I am," Harry admitted. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to step down. Out of everyone in the group, I would nominate Tracey to take over for me; I think she's got the best overview of the project."

Millie Bulstrode's attention wandered as the group got into some of the more esoteric possibilities for resolving the failure of their individual projects. Millie could research with the best of them, but the endless rehashing of details that they had gone over before bored her almost to tears.

Looking about the room, she spotted Stark's book bag within reach against the wall, and next to it lay the Golden Egg from the first task.

She looked up to the front of the room where Stark, Patil, and her cousin were deep in conversation about the long-term storage problems. She shrugged to herself and reached down to pick up the Egg.

The damned thing was heavy! Millie turned the massive construct over in her hands. Like so many highly enchanted artifacts, she could feel the magic in the Egg almost vibrating underneath the textured surface. But, what did it do?

Examining the surface of the Egg, Millie discovered that almost the entire surface engraved with fine grooves and patterns. Nothing that appeared to be any recognizable lettering. It was odd. And somehow… familiar. Peering closer at the surface of the Egg, she was surprised to find an almost unnoticeable seam.

Almost as if it were…

Millie blinked. She knew what this was. The magic the beneath the surface was a distraction. The real secret was the Egg itself. Placing the Egg down on the tabletop in front of her, she moved both her hands over the form searching for a familiar form.

On her third pass, she found it. Millie set her right thumb onto a slightly raised feature and pressed. Her efforts were rewarded with a metallic click that echoed off the stonewalls, silencing all the ongoing conversations.

Stark had looked up and met her eyes in surprise at the sound, "Millie?" he asked, "what are you doing?"

"Sorry," she said, starting to return the Egg to where she found it. "I got bored and…"

"No!" Stark exclaimed as he rushed to her side. "Don't stop. Show me what you did and tell me how you knew to do it. I've been futzing around with this stupid thing for a week and haven't gotten any reaction out of it at all. I thought I was going to have to X-ray it or ask for help from someone with intangibility. How did you make it click?"
"I haven't finished it yet," Millie said, her hands moving over the Egg's surface, finding the next segment and pulling until she was rewarded with another click. "I think it's like a Muggle Puzzle Box. My Da collects them. You have to move sections in a specific order to open it."

"Show me," Stark asked.

Cedric checked the room number on the note he had found under his plate at dinner, and nervously entered the classroom to find a smiling Fleur Delacour waiting for him.

"Good, you have come," she said. "I was worried no one would."

"Not just me then," Cedric asked, not sure if the news had him feeling disappointed or relieved.

The French woman blinked at him before throwing her head back and letting loose with a most undignified throaty laugh. "You thought…" she gasped once she had control of herself again. "You thought that I wanted…"

"It's not that funny," the Hufflepuff protested. "A lad can dream, can't he?"

"What is funny?" Viktor Krum asked as he entered the room.

"Just a cultural misunderstanding," Fleur assured the Quidditch Phenom while winking at Cedric. "Now we just need to wait for Harry. Before the First Task, he suggested that we work together to pool our resources prior to the tasks, and we all rejected the idea. I am here to suggest that we might have made a mistake."

"Yeah," Cedric nodded. "I haven't gotten the Egg open either."

"There is more to my changing my mind than that," Fleur protested, "but no, I have not opened it to discover the clues."

"Nor have I" Krum admitted. "My Headmaster wants to tell me what to do, but the oaths he took are preventing it. The man has no honor."

"I've tried every unlocking charm I could find," Fleur sighed.

"I've tried submerging my Egg in water, hot and cold, fresh and salt," Cedric said. "Nothing. I tried extreme heat, extreme cold, bright lights, utter darkness, standard unlocking charms, Gaelic unlocking charms, Chinese unlocking charms I got from my girlfriend, nothing has worked."

"I also froze it, and applied heat to it, and then I got frustrated and threw mine against the wall of one of the class rooms I was using," Krum supplied. It chipped the stone wall and not a mark on the Egg."

The door opened. "Hey everyone," Harry said as he came in. "What's up?"

"We want to talk about the alliance you suggested," Cedric said, while the other two students nodded.

"Cool," Harry said happily. "Just because we're competing, I don't think we need to be adversarial, you know?"

"Is everyone agreed?" Fleur asked.
"Yes," Viktor agreed, while Cedric nodded.

"Good," the young French woman said, producing her Golden Egg from a bag at her feet. "Our first project needs to be to discover how to open our eggs."

"That, I've got covered," Harry said, dropping his book bag on the floor and approaching the older girl and her Egg. He removed it from her hands. "There are enchantments on it, but it's basically a Mundane Puzzle Box," Harry explained as his hands moved over the engraved surface of the Egg without looking, until he located the raised feature he needed and pushed it in with his left thumb until an audible click echoed throughout the room. "That unlocks it, then you rotate it ninety degrees, find the newly raised cylinder, pull it out half an inch," another click. "Then at the top, rotate it 45 degrees clockwise looking down, and the Egg opens."

The youngest champion levered the top half of the Egg open on invisible hinges following the third click. "It looks like you've got the same things in your Egg that are in mine."

"How did you know to do that?" Fleur gasped.

"In all honesty," Harry grinned, "I didn't. I took the silly thing to a study group I'm in and while I was working on something else, one of my classmates figured it out. Her father collects puzzle boxes, and she thought the seams on the Egg looks similar and started playing with it. She said it is a simple puzzle as those things go. I'd about given up."

"We should all go get our Eggs," Cedric said. "Then compare the contents and try to figure out what we're going to have to do."

"Yes," Viktor agreed. "We do this now."

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In the far back corner of the Library, at the table Hermione Granger had claimed as her own three years before, a session of seventh year Arithmancy revision was interrupted when Viktor Krum spread the maps and notes obtained from his golden Egg on the table.

"An obstacle course?" Hermione asked dubiously. "That doesn't sound very… magical."

Viktor put way his notes for the arithmancy assignment before looking up to meet the younger girl's eyes. "The obstacles will be magical, of course," he laughed quietly. "We are to retrieve something… or perhaps, someone, the clues are not clear, from the center of the course, and take them to a randomly selected end point."

"It just sounds so… dull," she noted, "compared to facing a dragon I mean."

"I thought so too, until I looked at the drawings they gave us as clues," Krum explained. "There will be four approaches, each very different, and we will not know which we will run until just before we start. According to the notes, the judges are expecting the winning time for the task to be somewhere around two hours."

"Two hours?" Hermione gasped.

"Obviously, all competitors will run their courses at the same time," Viktor explained. "Each will face one set of obstacles on the way to the center, and another set on the way out."

"Are you sure you should be telling me this?" Hermione asked. "Harry is my friend after all."
The Durmstang Champion chuckled deeply, "Harry knows, all the competitors know, we planned our strategies together. We even have bet for who will win." He winked at his study partner. "Smart money is on Cedric. Since we cannot fly, Harry, Fleur and I think his build gives him advantage. Cedric disagrees; he says Fleur's heritage gives her the advantage over most of the terrains. Winner of second task gets 30 galleons."

"Thirty?" Hermione asked. "But there are four of you."

"Her-mi-oh-ne," the Seeker said in a scolding tone, "Why would winner pay himself?"

"Oh, right," the girls said, a bit disappointed to have made such a silly mistake. This is why she was caught by surprise when Viktor took her hand in his.

"Her-mi-oh-ne, I have question to ask."

She looked up in surprise. "What is it Viktor?"

Later that night Harry, Padma and Hermione were relaxing in the Ravenclaw common room, together on the well-worn sofa that the three of them had claimed as their own their first year.

"Viktor asked me to the Ball." Hermione said quietly.

"He did?" Padma asked.

"The Ball?" Harry asked, sitting up suddenly. "Oh hell."

"Language Harry," Hermione scolded absentmindedly.

"It occurs to me that I've never asked you to the Ball, have I?" Harry asked.

"No, you have not," Padma confirmed. "Parvati has been after me to double with her with a couple of Gryffies."

"How much groveling is this going to take?" Harry asked. "My only excuse is we've never had a dance before and I was worried about not getting killed by the dragon."

"Oh, woe is me," Hermione snarked, "I had to wave a flag at a dragon. How long are you going to try to milk that excuse, Harry?"

"As long as it works," Harry replied honestly.

"Just so you know, Hermione has been teaching me about Muggle dates," Padma said. "So, I know what you're supposed to do."

"Muggle dates?" Harry asked turning to his bushy haired friend. "What do you know about dating?"

"I've reviewed the reference material," Hermione sniffed.

"Reference material?" Harry repeated. "What do you mean by 'reference material'?"

"Movies," Padma explained. "We've seen so many wonderful movies about how Muggles date. It's confusing, but always ends so wonderfully."

"Wonderful," Harry sighed. His relationship was going to be judged in comparison to Romantic
Comedies.

"Professor McGonagall?"

Minerva McGonagall paused on her way out of the Great Hall with Pomona Sprout. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"I was wondering if we were allowed to attend the Yule Ball with someone who isn't a Hogwarts Student," the Ravenclaw asked. "I asked Professor Flitwick, but he said that he was unaware of any policy on the subject and that I should approach you."

Minerva and Pomona shared a glance and the two witches both suppressed smiles. The relationship that had blossomed between Miss Granger and Durmstang's Viktor Krum had been the talk of the staff room ever since Irma Pince had first reported it.

"That would be fine, Miss Granger," Minerva said with a nod. "You would hardly be the only Hogwarts student to have a date from another school."

"So, no special permissions are required?" The girl asked. "No forms to fill out?"

"Of course not," Pomona laughed.

"Thank you, Professors."

"Ah, to be young again," Pomona sighed as she watched the young girl walk away.

"Youth has its perks," Minerva agreed, "but it also has its disadvantages, Severus volunteered to do the 'safety' patrols of the gardens for the night of the Ball."

"Severus? Please," Pomona scoffed as the pair resumed their journey. "Severus is all bark. We had old McGinnis if you recall, that old biddy could detect anyone having fun within a 500-yard radius. She caught you a few times as I recall."

"And you a few times more, Pomona," Minerva sniffed.

The pair checked that no one was around them before they both began to laugh.

"Mr. Stark is here, Headmaster," Flitwick said as he led his Ravenclaw into the Headmaster's office, while wondering just what the old man wanted this time.

"Ah, Harry," the old man said. "So good to see you again."

"Yes sir?" Stark asked. "You'll forgive me sir, but could we hurry this up? Potions starts in fifteen minutes and Professor Snape is something less than forgiving of those who show up to his class late, excused or not."

"Of course, Harry," Albus smiled through his beard. "I was just concerned when I saw your name on the list of students leaving Hogwarts for the Yule Holidays"

The boy waited patiently for the Headmaster to explain his concern. Filius could not help but smile. The number of people who could get under the Headmaster's skin were few, but Harry Stark was one of them.
"You do intend to leave Hogwarts for the Yule Holidays, don't you, Harry?" Albus finally asked when the silence got too much for him.

"Yes sir, I do." The young man stood up, "will that be all?"

"Harry, you have to be at the Yule Ball," Dumbledore explained.

"Excuse me, sir, but I do not," Stark disagreed. "I have to compete in the Tasks. I have to do my level best to win. The magical contract that I gave you every chance to keep me out of made no mention of any dances, cotillions, or balls, as such; I do not have to attend. I have arranged, along with the bulk of my classmates, to leave the castle upon the completion of classes today."

"But tradition requires…"

"Headmaster," Stark sighed, "this is the first occurrence of the Triwizard Tournament in 177 years. Any 'traditions' associated with the old tournament are as dead as the people who last performed them."

"The other Champions are remaining in the castle in preparation for their duties during the Yule Ball," Albus said.

Stark smiled. "Both Miss Delacour and Mr. Krum have already left to spend some time with their families before the Ball. Cedric is planning to leave the same time I am. Once again, you show that you only pay any attention to my plans and none at all to anyone else's."

"Harry…" Albus seemed to search for the words before choosing to plead, "Please stay?"

"Headmaster, the Ball is Sunday at 7pm. I fully intend to be here, not because of any silly tradition, but because my girlfriend wants to attend."

Filius shook his head. Whenever these two came together, it seemed that they would come into conflict. The half goblin was not sure if it was due to Albus' insistence of being in control of Harry Stark's life or Harry's Stark's insistence that no one controlled him.

….===ooo000ooo===….  
Discontinuity

Suddenly Franklin Richards was somewhere else. He knew that he should know where he was, but he did not. Nothing made sense. Panic gripped him, and bile rose in his throat. Fighting against vomiting, Franklin fell backwards onto the ground, into snow. He crabbed in whatever direction was behind him, wanting nothing more than to be away.

Harry's face came into his field of vision.

"Frank, what's wrong?" He asked.

"Gotta…" Franklin said, trying and failing to fight against the panic, "gotta get away. Gotta leave!" He gathered his power and pushed. He could feel his Dad's inhibitor tech start to heat up as it fought against him, the terror made him push harder.

"FRANK!" Harry tackled him, holding him down. "It's the ward, it's repelling you."

Franklin heard his friend hiss in pain as Harry came into contact with the inhibitor where it had burned through his shirt, but couldn't bring himself to care as he fought to get away.
"My fault," Harry snarled, as he held on to Franklin tighter. "I never thought about how the repelling ward might affect you. It's trying to make you leave, it's supposed to be a gentle push, but I never thought about what it might be like if you just show up in the middle of the field. Look for it, Frank. You're the Master of Time, Space and Dimension, remember? Find the ward and make it stop affecting you."

Make it stop. At some level, Franklin thought that was a very good idea. He focused on his mind as Professor Xavier had taught him, and looked within himself. His Astral form came into being on his Mindscape, and that was where he found it. A force that was pushing on his consciousness. His Astral form visualized this force as a pulsing blue fog.

Harry was right. He was the Master of Time, Space, and Dimension. This 'blue fog' was not going to control him.

Franklin refocused his concentration on the fog. His father's inhibitor tech was dedicated on protecting the physical world from his power. Here on his Mindscape, it has no power at all. His power grasped the fog, lifting it off the surface of his Mindscape.

Immediately, the panic faded, but the embarrassment and anger that Franklin Richards felt did not. He used his power over his Mindscape to shape and compress the fog. More flooded in to replace what he had control over, so he took that too. Took it all. Compressing it smaller and smaller,

Finally, the sum total of the blue fog was compressed into a sphere the size of his fist. Franklin examined it for a heartbeat, analyzing what it was, and what it did. With a thought, he cancelled the fog's ability to affect him, and banished the sphere from his mind.

…and-===ooo000ooo===-…

Harry was still on top of him, holding him down. "Frank?"

"Get off me, Lard Ass," Franklin said, "I've got a girlfriend waiting for me, and I don't need you ruining my reputation with your PDAs."

Harry stood up before offering his hand to assist Franklin to his feet. "You okay?"

"That sucked in all kinda ways," Franklin admitted.

"Okay, just a second," Harry said, removing his phone from a pocket. "Nathan?" He said after hitting a speed-dial button. "Yeah, we arrived, sorry it took so long to let you know, had a problem when we arrived but everything is okay now."

Harry listened on the phone for a few moments. "Thanks again Nathan. We'll call when we need a pickup."

Harry shut down his phone and turned back to Franklin, "I'm really sorry, Frank. The Mundane repelling ward is supposed to be a light suggestion of reasons to go away. It never occurred to me to wonder what would happen if I brought you into the center of the ward scheme."

"I'd say that it was all alright, but," Franklin looked down at his filthy, burned, tuxedo, and then to Harry's, "We're a mess."

"That, at least," Harry laughed, "I can fix."

Franklin watched as his best friend produced his magic wand, waved it at him, and chanted, "Repairo!"
In his life, Franklin had seen many things that to him were everyday occurrences, but which never failed to amaze most of his friends. One of his uncles could light himself on fire and fly. The other was a walking pile of orange boulders. His father could stretch his body in ways that no one else in the world could imitate, and his mother could be invisible. The building he lived in had been thrown into orbit at least twice in his lifetime and he and Harry had run with the Power Pack.

None of that prepared him for seeing his charred tuxedo reassemble and clean itself as Harry waved his stick at it. Watching Harry repeat the process on himself did not dilute the experience in the slightest.

"Can Hermione do that too?" he asked when he was turning to examine himself.

"And a whole lot more," Harry sighed. "And she'll tell you all about it."

"Good," Franklin nodded.

"All about it," Harry repeated. "I love the girl, but she does go on. Just a second."

Harry dug into his ever-present shoulder bag and withdrew a bolt of black cloth. "You'll need this," he draped the fabric across Franklin's shoulders, and clipped it into place with a golden chain.

"An opera cape?" Franklin asked, lifting the silk cape up so that he could examine it. "I've never seen one of these things outside of a movie."

"And now, you own one. Merry Christmas. It will help you pass for the local fashions," Harry explained as he pulled his own cape on. "Hermione says she asked if she could bring you to the ball, but I'm betting that they aren't expecting you to be a Mundane."

"A Mundane?" Franklin asked. "Me?"

Harry shrugged. "Close enough. Come on."

The pair started toward the castle. "You know, I should probably ask, did you turn off the Mundane repelling ward for you, or for everyone?"

"I… I don't know," Franklin admitted. "If I killed it outright, is it going to cause a problem?"

"Hell," Harry smiled, "I don't know. I guess we'll find out."

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The Entrance Hall looked strange, full of people wearing different colors rather than the usual mass of black. Padma was waiting for Harry at the foot of the stairs. She looked very pretty indeed, in robes of pastel blue, with her long dark plait braided with gold while golden bracelets glimmering at her wrists.

"Wow," he said appreciatively.

"Thank you, sir," she said with a giggle. "It's good to see you again, Franklin, Hermione will be down in a moment, she stopped to help one of the other girls with a wardrobe problem and asked that I meet you."

"You look lovely, Padma," Franklin said, taking her hand. "Do we look all right?"

Padma smiled, "I think the two of you look extremely handsome," she laughed. "For actual fashion advice, you'd have to speak with Parvati, but I think Hermione will be extremely pleased to see you."
"Just Hermione will be pleased to see us?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Prat," Padma laughed, swatting Harry's arm, before looping hers around it. "I'm very happy to see you. But I'm not going to show you how much here in front of everyone."

"Curses," Harry frowned, "foiled again."

Padma leaned in to whisper in his ear. "I love the gloves and the necklace, but you spent too much money."

"No such thing," he disagreed. "Happy Christmas."

"I'd have worn the necklace, but it wouldn't have gone with these robes," she continued.

"Not that this isn't sickening or anything," Franklin interrupted, "but should we be concerned that Hermione isn't here yet?"

Harry turned to offer some snark when he caught sight of a young woman in blue robes descending the stairs.

It was Hermione.

But she didn’t look like Hermione at all. She had done something with her hair; it was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny, and twisted up into an elegant knot at the back of her head. She was wearing robes made of a floaty, periwinkle-blue material, and she was holding herself differently, somehow… or perhaps it was just that she did not have a fully loaded book bag over her right shoulder.

She was also smiling… somewhat nervously, he thought, but not at Padma, and most certainly not at him.

"Hi, Harry!" she said as she approached. "Hello Franklin."

Franklin stared up at Hermione in disbelief, his mouth hanging open. Harry nudged his best friend to get his attention and then covertly shoved him toward the girl on the stairs.

Franklin stumbled forward before catching himself. "HI!" he said much too loudly, "YOU LOOK REALLY NICE."

"Real smooth, Romeo," Harry said softly, earning himself a smack on the arm from Padma.

"Thank you, Franklin," Hermione said, as she continued down the stairs. "I was worried you wouldn't make it."

"He tried to bolt," Harry said helpfully, "But I tackled him and made him stick around."

"Dude," Franklin hissed, turning to face his best friend, "shut up!"

"Be nice, Harry," Padma scolded.

"I learned a long time ago to never believe anything Harry has to say, Franklin," Hermione said, entwining her arm around his. "I'm not about to start now.

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Professor McGonagall’s voice called, "Champions over here, please!"
Padma smiled and checked her outfit before smiling at Harry.

"See you guys inside after dinner," Harry nodded. "We classy folks in the spotlight have to avoid being seen mixing with the hoi polloi, don't you know?"

"I am going to hurt you, so very much," Hermione sighed.

"And I'll hold you down while she does it," Franklin agreed.

Harry and Padma strolled through, the crowd which parted to let them through. Professor McGonagall, wearing dress robes of red tartan and had them to wait on one side of the doors while everyone else went inside; they were to enter the Great Hall in procession once the rest of the students had sat down.

Fleur and Roger Davies joined them at the door; Davies appeared so stunned by his good fortune in having Fleur for a partner that he could hardly take his eyes off her. Cedric and Cho took up position on the other side of the doorway, with the Hufflepuff nodding to his competitors. It was when Krum finally arrived, that Professor McGonagall showed some surprise when she saw who the Quidditch Professional was escorting to the Ball, but she did not say anything.

Once everyone else settled in the Great Hall, Professor McGonagall had the champions and their partners to line up in pairs to follow her inside. They did so, and the assembled students in the Great Hall stood and applauded as they entered and started walking up toward a large round table at the top of the Hall, where the judges were waiting. The walls of the Hall were decorated in sparkling silver frost, with hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crossing the starry black ceiling. The House tables had gone; replaced by a hundred smaller, lantern-lit tables, each seating perhaps a dozen people.

Padma seemed to be concentrating on not tripping over her own feet.

"You've walked on this floor hundreds of times," Harry whispered.

"I'm so nervous," she replied. "Everyone is looking at us."

"Never let them see you sweat," Harry chuckled. "They all want to be you or envy me and want to be with you. Chin up, walk proud. You're the reason they're all here tonight."

"Yeah, right," Padma sniffed, though in all honesty, his words had made her feel better.

"The only reason I'm here is because you want to be," Harry confided. "If you hadn't wanted to come, I'd have stayed home."

"What about Franklin?" She asked, her fears forgotten.

"He's a big boy," Harry pointed out. "He could have gotten here on his own if he wanted."

Dumbledore smiled happily as the champions approached the Main table, his expression mirrored by Karkaroff as he watched Krum and his date draw nearer. Ludo Bagman, dressed in bright purple robes with large yellow stars, was clapping as enthusiastically as any of the students. Madame Maxime, who had changed her usual uniform for a flowing gown of lavender silk, was applauding them politely, and Mr. Crouch wearing brand-new, navy-blue dress robes and an expression of boredom offered little more than a golf clap.

Taking their seats, the champions found that there was, as yet, no food on the golden plates, but small menus were lying in front of each of them. Harry picked his up uncertainly and looked
around… there were no waiters. Dumbledore, however, looked carefully down at his own menu, and then speaking very clearly to his plate, said, "Pork chops!"

And pork chops appeared. Getting the idea, the rest of the table placed their orders with their plates too. Harry glanced over to discover that Padma appeared to be quite delighted by this new method of dining, an attitude he quite agreed with as he cut into his prime rib.

"But…" Lisa Turpin seemed to be searching for the words, "you're a Muggle?"

"Guilty," Franklin admitted, looking up from his pork chops. "I couldn't do your kind of magic if my life depended on it. I know some card tricks if it helps."

"But you can't be here if you're a Muggle," Lisa's date, Terry Boot insisted. "The castle's wards won't allow it."

"They were rough," Franklin nodded. "But I powered through. It's just a matter of will power, you know." Being an Omega Level Psi didn't hurt either, but Franklin wasn't going to mention that. These people had some odd prejudices against those they considered 'Muggles', which oddly echoed the thoughts he often heard coming from those who thought they had no problem with Mutants but didn't want their sister marrying one.

"Well, I'm happy you made it," Hermione said. "I've been looking forward to you coming since Harry said he'd get you here if you wanted to come."

"Oh, yeah, good old Harry," Franklin nodded. "What did he get you for Christmas anyway? He's been hinting about something ever since he got back."

Hermione blushed. "We'll talk about it later," she said.

"That bad?" Franklin asked. "He's been laughing at me a lot about it. Sort of like I did when I got that Harry Potter doll from Parvati."

"But come on," Lisa interrupted again. "You're a Muggle, the Wards wouldn't let you see the place much less come in for a Ball."

"Lisa," Neville Longbottom asked from across the table, "has anyone ever suggested that you might have a one-track mind that has a problem accepting the obvious?"

Once Dinner was finished, the lights in the Great Hall brightened and the four champions and their partners made their way to the center of the room. Once they were in place, the band began to play a slow, mournful tune that struck Harry to be something of a waltz. The four couples stared nervously at each other for several seconds.

"Shall we dance?" Harry asked with a smile.

Padma giggled for a moment before moving into his arms. "I suppose we should."

Harry carefully guided Padma through the first few steps until she found his rhythm. Cedric and Cho were the next couple to start to dance, followed by Viktor and his date. Finally, Fleur had to manhandle a befuddled Roger into a semblance of a dance.
"You dance nicely," Padma whispered as they moved about the floor. "I was worried. Hermione bet me that you wouldn't know how to waltz."

"Hermione underestimates me," Harry laughed. "She failed to take into account the number of society events I got dragged to every year, or the number of surrogate mothers I had, all of whom were looking to civilize me. It never worked, but I learned to dance."

"You expect me to believe your father 'dragged' you to society parties?" Padma asked.

"Dad's exact words were 'if I've gotta go, you've gotta go.'" Harry explained. "It was really my own fault; I shouldn't have laughed at Dad for having to wear his tux. Next thing I knew, I had my own penguin suit."

Other couples were starting to join them on the dance floor. Students, teachers, even Ministry people. "Professor Flitwick said that they're only going to play three waltzes, then popular music for the rest of the night," Padma explained.

"Doesn't matter," Harry said, as he guided them to avoid other dancers on the floor. "As long as we have fun."

"Cutting in loser," Harry said, tapping Franklin on the shoulder, "Go dance with Padma. I took her breath away, so she could probably use the laughs."

"You are about two seconds away from losing the ability to pronounce the letter 'P', Harry" Franklin threatened.

"Like I'd miss it," Harry snarked. "Go dazzle 'adma, Frank."

"Hi," Harry said as he spun his friend onto the dance floor. "How you doing tonight?"

"You know," Hermione said, "I'd almost forgotten that I was angry with you. Thank you for reminding me."

"Angry with me?" Harry asked innocently. "What did I do?"

"Your so-called Christmas present," she sniffed. "You gave me an anatomically correct Franklin doll."

"No, no no, I most certainly did not," Harry protested. "I gave you an authentic Franklin Richards Action Figure. It's an actual, honest to god, numbered, collector's item, part of the Fantastic Four collection. As far as its anatomy goes, it never occurred to me to pull its trousers down Ms. Pervert."

"You didn't know?" Hermione asked.

"Lord, no," Harry laughed. "I'll admit to it being something of a joke and a way of paying Frank back for getting Parvati to send him one of those damned Harry Potter dolls, but I had no idea it was packing. How anatomically correct is it?"

"I'm not answering that," she said with finality.

"Have you told Frank yet?"

"No," Hermione admitted. "He knows you gave me something that you thought was funny, but I haven't told him what it is."
"Yet," Harry nodded as the song ended.

"Yet," Hermione agreed.

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"I've got to sit down," Hermione laughed as she snagged a glass of punch off the drinks table.

"After only an hour of dancing?" Franklin laughed, grabbing his own drink. "No stamina, we'll have to work on that."

"We will, will we?" Hermione asked her eyes dancing in the light, leading him back to the table.

"Well, yeah," Franklin nodded, holding her chair for her before taking his own. "You've got to be tough if you're going to keep up with a New Yorker."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said looking at him over the glass.

"I don't believe you Granger," a new voice broke in. "It's bad enough you're here, but you've brought a filthy Muggle to Hogwarts?"

Franklin looked up at the new speaker. A large older boy with something of an attitude.

"Who I date is none of your business Derrick," Hermione responded firmly, though Franklin could pick up more than a little fear behind her words.

"I'm making it my business, Granger," the large kid said, leaning over the table in a threatening manner. "You're not so bad, really. You've not like most of the Mudbloods, you've actually made the effort, you've managed to fit in. But then you had to spoil it with him."

Several of this guy's friends gathered behind him. Franklin recognized this for what it was a classic bully confrontation. Why did these schmucks always bring an audience? He reached out with his Psionics to learn what he could.

Quinton Derrick, 17, youngest son of three. Lousy grades, no prospects and he knew it. Went out with his father and… Oh, no. Just no. A lesson had to be taught, and it had to be taught now.

"Stark and Longbottom aren't here to back you up now, Granger," the jerk was continuing, "maybe it's time to show you how to behave like a proper witch."

"How small is your dick, anyway?" Franklin asked in a conversational manner.

"What?" the bully all but screamed, turning his attention toward him.

"Well, if that's your idea of a pickup line, you can't have that much experience," Franklin pointed out. He stood up and extended his hand. "Franklin Richards."

Derrick just looked at Franklin as if he had grown a second head.

"This is the part where you say 'Quinton Derrick' and shake my hand. It's just good manners."

"Why would I shake a filthy Muggle's hand?" Derrick sneered before realization crossed his features. "How did you know my name?"

"Well, it would prove you're not frightened of nasty, dirty, little me," Franklin said with a small grin. He had each of Derrick's friends' positions and intentions mapped out in his mind. They had actually
thought he would just sit there and allow them to frighten Hermione and abuse him. "Not that I blame you, I mean, you having such a tiny dick and all, and I'm a filthy animal from New York City. But really, I insist. Shake my hand. I hate to hurt people I haven't observed the basic niceties with."

With that, Derrick's wand came out, followed by those of his followers, six in all. Franklin dipped into each of their minds the way he had been taught by Emma Frost at Xavier's school. They all depended on spoken spells to cast? He quietly removed each of the follower's ability to speak. None of them noticed.

"You're going to regret ever coming to Hogwarts, Muggle," Derrick snarled.

"Cool, a stick," Franklin said, ripping the wand from the older boy's hands with a telekinetic grab, "can I look at it? Thanks."

Franklin sat down again, turning the wand over in his hands. "Nice. What kind of wood is this?"

"How…" Derrick swallowed loudly, "how did you do that? No Muggle can do that."

"You're wrong, Derrick," Franklin said with a shake of his head. "Many Muggles can do that and a lot more. I know one that would have popped three ten-inch knives out of each his hands and carved up the table and you for being as disrespectful to a young lady as you were. He'd have let you keep your wand just for the fun of making you eat it."

Franklin smiled at that thought. "Me, I'm just your garden variety Psionic. You know, telepath, telekinetic, master of time, space and dimension. I know what you're thinking, I know what you and your father do on your little excursions, and I know that you'll never be able to do that again. If you try, you'll find a whole world of pain, and I know what you and your buddies had planned for me. But now, those plans have changed."

With a thought, Franklin took control of Derrick's body. "Now, pay attention Derrick, I'm going to explain how life works, since obviously no one ever did that for you. You're going to walk away, while you still can." The meat-puppet named Quinton Derrick extended his hand and Franklin returned the wand. Against his will, the 7th year raised the wand to point it at his own face and opened his mouth.

"If I were to tell you to, you would cast the worst spell you know into your own face," Franklin said quietly. "Threaten Hermione again and I might just do that. Now, she'd be disappointed in me for doing that, but I know what you had planned, you and all your little friends. Are you wondering why they haven't come to help you?"

Derrick suddenly found he could control his neck, and given the opportunity, he looked to his friends, finding them holding their wands but unable to speak. Utter terror gripped him as he realized just how badly he had underestimated the young Muggle.

"Well done, Derrick," Franklin said. "I always like to see it when someone learns something new. You cannot frighten me, you cannot attack me, and you cannot teach Hermione how to be a 'proper witch'. Do we understand each other?"

The 17-year-old nodded energetically.

"And thus, endeth the lesson," Franklin said, releasing his control of the larger boy's body. "Oh, by the way Derrick? You should spread the word, if I hear about you or any of your friends bothering Hermione or any other young lady of any kind, anywhere, Harry Stark and Neville Longbottom will be the very last people in the world you will need to worry about. I will be paying attention. Do we
understand each other?"

"Yes," the larger boy nodded.

"Good man," Franklin said, cancelling the speech block on Derrick's friends. "You should probably
go now."

Franklin watched the group of older boys run away before turning to Hermione. She had an
undecipherable expression on her face.

One of the rules he set for himself as a Psi was to never read someone unnecessarily and her surface
thoughts were a roiling confused knot of noise. Had he screwed up?

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Hermione sat with her hands in her lap, fighting against the panic that threatened to consume her. To
think the night had started so wonderfully. Dinner, the dancing, then that horrible troll Derrick had
ruined everything by coming over and being nasty to her.

But Franklin had defended her… perhaps a touch more… frighteningly than she would have liked,
but he had defended her.

So, of course, Snape had swooped out of nowhere, the way he always did when one of his
Slytherins started something they couldn't finish, spoiling her night, and predicting her expulsion.

The Headmaster sat behind his desk, looking more disappointed than angry.

"Miss Granger, what made you think that you could bring a Muggle to Hogwarts?" He asked
quietly.

"I asked permission," Hermione responded.

"The girl is lying," Snape snapped.

"I'm not," Hermione protested. "I asked Professor McGonagall," she looked to the Deputy
Headmistress, "tell them."

"You most certainly did not," Minerva McGonagall said. "You asked about attending with Viktor
Krum."

"Excuse me?" Franklin asked in a helpful tone.

"Viktor?" Hermione asked. "I was never going to attend the Ball with Viktor. I mean he asked me,
but…"

"Quit your lying, you insufferable know it all," Snape said.

"Excuse me," Franklin tried again, this time with a bit more force to his tone.

"I'm not lying," Hermione said, on the verge of tears, "I'm not!"

"Severus!" Minerva scolded, "You will conduct yourself appropriately."

"I'm afraid the punishments will be severe," Dumbledore sighed.

~ EXCUSE ME ~
Franklin's voice echoed in all of their minds.

Instantly the attention of everyone in the room focused on the blond boy from New York City, the three adults had their wands out and pointed at him.

"Hi," Franklin said with a wide smile. "I'm Franklin Richards, poor, pathetic, insignificant, Muggle to even the lightest among you, filthy animal not to be trusting not to make a mess indoors to the rest."

"Might I ask how you managed to speak in our minds?" Dumbledore asked, his wand not wavering from the boy's face.

"Well, truth be told, on top of being a pathetically inadequate Muggle, I'm also a Mutant," the boy explained. "A Psionic to be exact. Telepath, Telekinetic, like that. Now, while you've all been screaming at poor Hermione and calling her a liar, I've figured out what happened, so, why don't we all put down our pointy sticks and try to conduct ourselves like adults for a few minutes while I explain it to you?"

"You expect us to believe this nonsense?" Snape snarled.

"Severus Tobias Snape, born January 9th 1960," Franklin sighed, "That makes you thirty-five in fifteen days. You hated your father for his cruelty, spent half your time loving your mother for her kindness and the other half hating her for her weakness, the only woman you've ever loved is…"

"ENOUGH!" Snape screamed.

"Fine," Franklin's voice was cold, "then stop behaving like a child and put your stick away before I get angry. Trust me when I say you wouldn't like me when I'm angry. I dislike having weapons pointed at me."

The three adults put away their wands and continued to stare at the young man.

The issue boils down to misunderstandings and false expectations," Franklin explained. "You'll have to forgive me Professor McGonagall, but you're remembering Hermione asking you about the Ball incorrectly. Here's what happened:"

Hermione knew that Franklin's powers were not magical, but still the fact that he made no gestures and spoke no incantations surprised her before a scene of the Entry Hall outside the Great Hall formed in the middle of the Headmaster's office.

"Professor McGonagall?" a translucent Hermione in her school robes asked.

A similarly translucent Minerva McGonagall paused on her way out of the Great Hall with Pomona Sprout. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"I was wondering if we were allowed to attend the Yule Ball with someone who isn't a Hogwarts Student," the other Hermione asked. "I asked Professor Flitwick, but he said that he was unaware of any policy on the subject and that I should approach you."

The two teachers shared a glance. "That would be fine, Miss Granger," Minerva said with a nod. "You would hardly be the only Hogwarts student to have a date from another school."

"So, no special permissions are required?" The girl asked. "No forms to fill out?"

"Of course not," Pomona laughed.
"Thank you, Professors."

"Ah, to be young again," Pomona sighed as she watched the young girl walk away.

"Youth has its perks," Minerva agreed, "but it also has its disadvantages, Severus volunteered to do the 'safety' patrols of the gardens for the night of the Ball."

"Severus? Please," Pomona scoffed as the pair resumed their journey. "Severus is all bark. We had old McGinnis if you recall, that old biddy could detect anyone having fun within a 500-yard radius. She caught you a few times as I recall."

"And you a few times more, Pomona," Minerva sniffed.

The pair checked that no one was around them before they both began to laugh.

"You will notice that no mention of any 'Victor', whoever he may be, was made," Franklin pointed out.

"That is obviously the girl's version of events, edited to protect her," Snape sneered.

"Why are you so invested in tearing her down?" Franklin asked. "For the record, that was Professor McGonagall's memory, unfiltered through her expectations, and obviously so, otherwise how could it have continued after Hermione had left?"

"So, your… assault on Quinton Derrick was based upon what he was thinking?" Dumbledore asked.

"Assault?" Franklin asked. "What assault would that be? I never touched him."

"Young Mr. Derrick is currently in the Hospital Wing claiming you took control of his body," Dumbledore pointed out.

"True enough, as far as it goes," Franklin pointed out. "I certainly never touched him, he outweighs me by at least a hundred pounds, and he's magical while I'm but a poor pathetic Muggle. I can show you my memories of the event if you like."

"I rather suspect that would be unlikely to be productive," Dumbledore sighed.

"Well then, how about memories of Mr. Derrick's plans for Hermione and myself? Oh, and his adventures with his father?" Franklin asked as the three adults stiffened.

"Franklin?" Hermione asked.

"That's not for you to see," Franklin whispered. "That jerkwad's mind is a sewer, but don't worry, he's permanently terrified of Muggles and Muggleborn magic users for the rest of his life. Just a little gift I left him."

The professors relaxed, with Dumbledore and McGonagall showing expressions of revulsion.

~You knew,~ Franklin sent into Snape's mind, eyeing the Potion's Master like he was an unpleasant something found under a rock. ~None of that was surprising to you in the slightest.~

"Get out of my mind," Snape growled.

"Mr. Richards…" the Headmaster began, "it would probably be best if you never returned to Hogwarts."
"I wasn't really planning on it," Franklin admitted. "After the Ball."

~I'll be watching you, old man,~ he sent to Snape's mind. ~If anything happens to Hermione, you'll pay.~

"From the New World?" Snape sneered.

"The extent of my reach would surprise you," Franklin laughed aloud.

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"So, you two are spending the night?" Harry asked two hours later as he led the way to the exit to the Hogwarts grounds.

"Hermione, Parvati and I are flooing home tomorrow and Hermione's parents are coming by in the afternoon to pick her up," Padma explained.

"We'd offer you a lift," Franklin said, "but our ride is a direct return to our point of origin."

"You had better not made the quinjet's crew sit out in the cold all this time," Hermione scolded. "It is Christmas, after all."

"Oh, we didn't fly," Harry laughed as they got to the door where the Headmaster and his Deputy waited. "We found another way."

"I'm afraid that you won't be able to leave the castle tonight, Mr. Stark," the Headmaster said.

"Excuse me?"

"The rules are clear," Dumbledore explained. "No Hogwarts students are allowed out on the grounds after 10pm."

"Even the Durmstang and Beauxbaton students are being escorted by their staff representatives," McGonagall pointed out.

"Odd that this was never mentioned," Harry sighed.

"The rules are not suspended over the holidays, Mr. Stark," McGonagall sniffed.

"Yeah, I guess it's good that we don't really need to leave the castle to leave the castle," Harry nodded, pulling his phone from a pocket and dialing. "Nathan?" he said once the phone connected. "Bodyslide by two. Goodnight ladies, call you tomorrow."

The assembled magic users watched in open-mouthed amazement when the two young men appeared to slide away to nowhere.

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Padma and Hermione arrived at the Ravenclaw Dorms to find most of the upper form girls waiting for them.

"There you are," Cho said unnecessarily. "We've been waiting for you."

"What?" Hermione asked.

"Why?" Padma asked.
"Your Muggle boyfriend," Penny Clearwater said quietly. "He did something that terrified the most virulent bloodpurists in Slytherin. What did he do? And how did he manage it without anyone else noticing?"

Padma and Hermione shared a look, as Hermione tried to think of some way to explain how someone as nice as Franklin could also be so terrifying.

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"Well?" the man with the eye patch asked.

"This is extremely unprofessional," the green haired woman said defiantly. "We have expended an extraordinary amount of effort getting our agent in place. I'm not going to just hand it all over to you…"

"It's cute the way you're pretending you have a choice," the man interrupted. "If you like we can discuss all of this with the Oversight Council. Again. Though I'm fairly sure that doing so would mean that one of our organizations will have a new director by the end of the day."

The woman glared at him, causing Nicholas Fury to sigh. "Brand, I was doing this before you were a gleam in whatever your alien father used to see. S W O R D's brief is for extra-planetary threats. It may have escaped your notice, but both Starks and the Wand users are Earth based. That means it falls to S H I E L D to keep an eye on them."

"My agent is…" the woman noted.

"Your agent is much appreciated," Fury interrupted her. "And I'll probably let you have him back as soon as I confirm that the Wand users are wrong about their Black Magic Boogie Man coming back from the dead. Unless, of course, the Wand users are right and your agent ends up well positioned to help the Boogie Man to die again. I've taken over paying him, and will have a nice big intra-service cooperation citation for his service jacket when he's done and I give him back to you."

Abigail Brand's mouth set to a firm line as she handed over the thumb drive containing the reports. "I hate you."

"You, all three of my ex-wives, more than 80 percent of my staff, the entire Oversight Council, and pretty much the sum total of international security forces from all sides," Fury noted with a small grin. "They're having team jackets made. What size should I put you down for?"

Franklin packed away his notes from class and prepared to join the rest of his classmates in heading to lunch.
Richards nodded, placed his backpack back on the floor and waited while the rest of his class exited Xavier's classroom.

"I thought we might speak about your interaction with the magic users over the Christmas holiday," Professor Xavier said quietly.

"Yes sir?" Franklin asked innocently. He knew that Uncle Johnny's go to advice to 'admit nothing' was pointless when dealing with a telepath of Xavier's level, but habit dies hard.

"Pointless, indeed," Xavier agreed verbally. "Consider this an extra credit assignment for your Psionics Ethics class. How do you evaluate your dealings with Mr. Quinton Derrick?"

"A bully with an inflated sense of entitlement," Franklin said cautiously.

"He, and his friends, intended to do me harm, and were seriously considering sexual assault on my friend for the crime of associating with me, a mere 'Muggle'."

"Accurate as far as it goes," Xavier agreed with a nod. "And your actions?"

"I negated his backup by blocking their access to their speech centers, removing the ability to cast spells since none of them had gained any proficiency in non-verbal casting. Losing the ability to form speech further rattled them. I then took control of Derrick's body and explained the facts of life to him."

Again, Xavier nodded. "And you believe your response was appropriate?"

"I do," Franklin answered with his own nod. "Had they opened with violence, my response would have been different, but Derrick decided that he was going to frighten Hermione first, so I put the fear of God into him instead. I also installed some psychological blocks that will guarantee that he will never again accompany his father on one of their 'Muggle Hunts'."

Xavier sat back in his powered chair, steepling his fingertips as he did so, "Franklin, I cannot help but wonder if you might have made the situation worse."

"Worse, how?" the younger mutant asked. "He intended violence and sexual assault. I did him no harm at all, unless he tries something like that again, then he will find his bowels will betray him. Any member of my family would have beaten him bloody, including my mother. Any member of the staff of this school would do worse. You, yourself have done worse to people who were not threatening in any way."

"Excuse me?" Xavier said in surprise.

"The way you modified Kitty Pryde's parents' minds when they were going to refuse to allow her to attend this school, for example?"

Xavier paled. "How do you know about that?"

"Logan's defenses drop off when he's had a few," Franklin shrugged. "He saw you do it. It was unusual enough for him to make specific note of it."

"You have penetrated Logan's mental defenses?" Xavier asked in surprise.

"It was at Kitty's going away party," Franklin explained. "Logan tolerates most of us, but a few of the girls… Jubilee and Kitty in particular, tickle his paternal instincts. It takes a lot of alcohol to get
past his healing factor, but he manages it sometimes, and he was pretty deep into his cups by the end of the party, reminiscing about life with Kitty. I wasn't looking in his head, I just sort of overheard."

"I assure you," Xavier said hesitantly, "I had my reasons for how I dealt with the Pryde family."

"And I had my reasons for how I dealt with the Derrick and his friends," Franklin pointed out.

Xavier lowered his hands to grip the armrests of his chair. "Franklin, you are a young man of extraordinary power and range. With that power comes extraordinary responsibility."

Franklin refrained from pointing out Xavier was paraphrasing someone else's' line.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked a bit surprised to be led into a section of the castle he didn't recognize. After three and a half years, he thought he had been everywhere.

"Somewhere private," Neville explained without explaining.

"You know," Harry snarked. "It frightens me when you get all mysterious."

"Good," Neville nodded when he stopped in front of an unmarked door. "We're here, inside."

Harry proceeded through the door ahead of his friend, and was surprised to find an elaborate potion lab set up.

"Harry," Neville said as he perched upon a stool, "you are my best friend."

"Thanks, Nev," a grinning Harry responded.

"Shut up Harry," the Sion of the Longbottom family sighed. "You are also my only real friend. Before you found Trevor at the station first year, I'd never had any friends, at all."

"Oh, stop," Harry laughed, "you're going to make me get all misty."

"Harry," Neville shouted. "Listen to me. This is important. I'm not going to lose you."

Harry blinked and sat down on the other stool. "Nev, I'm not planning on going anywhere."

Silence filled the room for a five count.

"You do know I like girls, right?" Harry asked.

"What?"

"Not that there's anything wrong with being, you know, gay. I've got no problems with that sort of attraction, but I don't share it. I have to say I can understand your attraction, and I'm honored…"

"Damn it, Harry," Neville said, pinching the bridge of his nose as if trying to ward off a migraine. "I'm not really in the mood for your smart arsed commentary on life. When I saw you waving that damned flag in front of the dragon, I thought I was going to lose my best, my only real friend. I'm not gay, you arrogant wally. And if I was, I could do a whole lot better than you. Your skinny arse doesn't do anything for me."

"Okay," Harry said with a pout. "Now my feelings are hurt."
"The history of the Triwizard Tournament suggests that each task is more dangerous than the last," Neville continued, ignoring Harry's snark. "That means that the next one will be worse than facing a dragon. I know that you think it's just going to be an obstacle course, but there will likely be much more to it than that."

Harry nodded. "We've figured that much out. There are hints in the eggs that told us as much. So, why am I here?"

"Evidently, alchemy isn't something you can just learn," Neville said. "You have to have something special in your magic, which I evidently do."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "de Albo explained that."

"Master Alchemist de Albo," Neville corrected forcefully. "My point is that you've got it too. Maybe not as strong as a dedicated alchemist, but enough to make most of what I can do work."

"And?"

"And you and I, Harry, are going to be spending ever free moment over the next month and a half in this lab making sure you can use alchemy to help you survive. Between your armor and what alchemy I can teach you, I'm making sure my best friend survives this stupid contest."

"Thanks, Nev," Harry said. "And I mean it. But, come on, seriously, I'm not your only friend. There is still Hermione, Padma, Susan, and Hannah, not to mention your Gryffie friends."

Neville felt his face heat up with his blush. "My link to the girls is through you, and while I get along with the others in Gryffindor, but I wouldn't call them friends. I've never been invited to their homes and none of them have ever accepted an invitation to mine."

Neville hesitated for a moment before continuing. "At least until I manage to get a real girlfriend, you are the source of my social life. That means I need to keep you alive."

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The agent pressed himself into the shadows as he observed the pair.

Observe and report. That was his brief for this mission. That had not changed with the change of command structure.

If the agent was honest with himself, he was not sure how he felt being the subject of a pissing contest between the two theoretically aligned but territorial bureaucracies. Just whom he reported to did not matter to him, as long as promises were kept.

That being said, it was clear, at least to him, that the previous year's incursion by the Kree was aimed at the Stark boy, and not the magic users at large. The interrogation reports showed that clearly, but the suits were being suits.

Rumors about the dead terrorist coming back to life were turning out to be more difficult to pin down. No one he had happened upon spoke of any specifics about the dead man, however it was very clear that none of the wizards who followed him during his life, and few who opposed him, doubted his ability to return from the dead.

The agent had seen many things in his life, and a dead man returning to life did not even crack the top 100 Weird and Frightening things he had personally witnessed. Still, returning to life always had a price.
It would be interesting to see the price Tom Riddle would have to pay.

The first Potions class of the new term was the last class of the first Friday back for the 4th year Ravenclaws, and uncharacteristically, Hermione found herself dreading it. Harry had noticed that Severus Snape had been glaring at her whenever they were in sight of each other since the beginning of the term, and now, in his classroom, he focused his attention on her with an evil smile on his face.

Hermione fidgeted on her stool under his attention, barely noticing that Harry sighed and murmured "God damn it," while shaking his head.

"Miss Granger," Snape sneered, "I find your attitude unsatisfactory, I think perhaps…" the man's mouth continued movement as if he was speaking, but no sound emerged. His expression changed from one of satisfaction to one of panic before that expression faded to one of vacant distraction.

After several seconds of silence from the professor, the class was surprised when Harry stood up.

"I think that's class for the day," he said, addressing the assembled Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. "It would probably be a good idea for everyone to review today's assignment and be ready for the next class."

Susan Bones could not tear her eyes away from the apparently petrified professor. "Should we tell someone?"

"He'll be fine," Harry responded shaking his head. "I'm out 50 bucks, but he'll be all right."

It took three minutes while everyone in the room wondered why Stark might have lost fifty deer before the first student headed for the door. That broke the dam and the classroom emptied out.

"Are you coming?" Padma asked.

"Nah," Harry shook his head, "I think I'd best hang around for a few minutes. I'll see you two at dinner if I don't finish up here first."

Severus Snape blinked his eyes. He had been about to sentence the arrogant Muggleborn to a week of detention when suddenly the room faded away to nothing, leaving him standing in what was, by all appearances a grey infinite plane with no distinguishing features at all.

What had happened?

"It's called 'the Mindscape'." A voice interjected into the absolute silence that he had only noticed when it was broken.

Snape spun in place to find himself facing the Muggle boy from the Headmaster's office. "Where am I? What is this place?" he demanded. "Why am I here?"

"You're in your classroom," the boy said with a grin. "All this, it's called 'the Mindscape', and it's not really anywhere. "I brought you here you are here because you were about to be a dick. I believe I told you that I would be keeping an eye on you. What do you think of my range now?"

In a smooth move Snape pulled his wand, "You will return me to Hogwarts."

The blond boy's smile widened and Snape's wand drooped as if it was a piece of spaghetti.
"My wand?" Snape gasped.

"Once again, slowly, you are at Hogwarts, it's just your mind I've brought here," Franklin Richards explained. "You look like you because that's how you see yourself; you have a wand because you can't imagine yourself without one. That said, this is my world, and I control everything about it. For the sake of your self-image, you need to put your wand away, because we're going to talk, and you're not leaving here until I'm happy."

Harry settled into Snape's chair and swung his feet up on the Potions Master's desk, and wished he had thought to pack a novel. He honestly thought that Snape had grown up enough since first year to refrain from going after Hermione, just because he could.

Franklin had disagreed, and the bet made. Harry hated losing, but he had to admit that he probably should have trusted Frank's psionic insights.

A fluttering of leathery wings alerted Harry that Lockheed was in the room with him before the mini-dragon landed on the desk and looked at him with a questioning expression.

"Where have you been?" Harry asked. "I haven't seen you for a couple of weeks."

"Hhmp!" the mini-dragon responded as if it should be obvious. The alien then nodded toward the Potions Master.

"He was about to be a dick," Harry explained. "Frank high-jacked his psyche so that they could have a little talk about behaving himself."

Lockheed nodded. "Wichuds? Guud, Shape guy id a jherk!"

"Oh, now you talk," Harry noted. "Ass."

The Mini-Dragon offered a smug expression in return. "Pwore babee."

"Ass," Harry repeated as he rooted around in his book bag and extracted his trig textbook, deciding to get something done while he babysat Snape's body. That was when he noticed the noise coming Lockheed.

"Are you humming the Mr. Ed theme just to annoy me?"

"Ahur hur hur," the Mini-Dragon laughed.

"I do hope we've come to an understanding," Franklin smiled. "Next time I won't be so nice."

Without pausing for a response from his guest, Richards released Severus Snape back to his body. After pausing to verify that no portions of anyone's intellect remained on the Mindscape, he allowed himself back into his own body, where he quickly reviewed the notes on Conversational French the portion of his mind he had left in control of his body had taken in his absence, and congratulated himself on going unnoticed in his extracurricular excursion.

~ Oh, you were noticed, Mr. Richards, ~ Charles Xavier's voice spoke in his head. ~ A weeks detention with me, I think, where we will discuss the ethics of Psionics abusing their powers. ~

Damn, Franklin thought, the detection tarnishing the glow of his theoretically undetected crime. Then
thoughts of Hermione crossed his mind. Oh, well, worth it.

"Uh," Snape breathed as his awareness returned to his body.

"Oh, good, you're back."

The Potions Master turned to find the child with Potter's face and Lily's eyes looking up at him from his own desk. The boy's accursed miniature dragon was nearby observing them both.

Stark stood up and began packing his book and notes away. "Did you and Franklin come to an understanding?"

"Why are you here?" Snape demanded.

The boy shrugged as he packed away the papers and book he had been using. "I didn't think leaving your body here unattended would have been the best plan. Things happen in this old castle."

"So, you're here to gloat?"

"Gloat?" Stark asked incredulously. "Why would I gloat? I bet Franklin $50 that you could be an adult about what happened."

"You... You bet on me?" Snape echoed in his own incredulity.

"Of course, I did," the boy said. "I thought it was a sure thing. I mean, after our bad start first year, you've been nothing but fair. It was still very clear that you detest the ground I stand on and the air I breath, but you've been a professional in all of our interactions. Franklin was worried that you'd be a dick about whatever happened in the Headmaster's office and I told him he was being ridiculous. Now, I'm out $50."

"Few students would dare speak to me in such a manner," Snape said darkly.

"Few students tell you the truth," Stark noted. "I really don't understand you. You're a master at your craft, which almost makes up for your crappy teaching skills, why did you risk all that to abuse a 15-year-old girl?"

"Risk?"

"Was Franklin too subtle for you?" Harry Stark asked incredulously. "If you don't mellow out I'll have to get used to a new potions teacher." The boy paused for a moment while running his left hand through his unruly hair. "Look. Franklin is head over heels for Hermione Granger, and he will do anything, anything to protect her. If you continue to contemplate attacking her, he will know and take action.

Snape paled at that. "Are you... Are you saying that he would kill me?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Frank would never kill you, he's a good person. With his powerset, he pretty much has to be. His folks have spent his entire life teaching him to rein himself in. No, Franklin Richards would never kill you."

"Then what did you mean?" Snape demanded.

"There are worse things you can do to someone than to kill them," Stark explained shouldering his bag. "Take you, for example. If I were to guess, I would say that the most important thing in your life
if your abilities in a potions lab. Frank wouldn't have to guess, he'd know, and if you made him angry enough, he'd take it away. Just poof, and you'd still be you, but you would no longer know anything about potions, at all. Or if he was feeling particularly vindictive towards you, he'd leave the knowledge and introduce a palsy to the point where you'd never be able to do a stir again, maybe never be able to hold a wand."

"Impossible," Snape scoffed.

"Sure," Harry nodded. "Just like someone's consciousness being yanked out of his body and pulled into the Mindscape is impossible. Professor, you have to know that there are things outside your experience. Calling something 'impossible' is just asking for trouble these days. I mean, everyone in the castle knows that you said it was impossible for Neville Longbottom would never have any skill in potions and his problems turned out to be due to his affinity for alchemy overpowering his potions to the point of disaster. Who knows what might have happened if his grandmother hadn't hired de Albo."

Snape ground his teeth. There was no denying it, not even to himself, James Potter's son was right. "Has Diablo offered Longbottom the apprenticeship yet?"

"Who?" Stark asked, his attention suddenly focused on his potions instructor.

"Master Alchemist de Albo's books are all written under the pen name Diablo," Snape explained.

The boy's eyes went wide. "I need to go Professor; I hope you think about what we've spoken about, because it would be a hassle to break in a new teacher before our OWLS."

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"You seem distracted," Padma said gently leaning into Harry as the pair strolled the grounds, bundled against the February weather. "Is something bothering you about the second task?"

"Other than being forced into it?" Harry asked. "No, it's something else."

"Can I help?"

"Not really," Harry sighed. "It's just something that's bothering me that I can't verify. I need to talk to someone who isn't at school or online."

"Not online? Not one of your friends back home then?"

"No," Harry admitted shaking his head. "And I'm probably being silly worrying about something based only on a hint of a rumor and likely coincidence. It's just nagging at me."

"Normally, I'd suggest you worried too much," Padma said with a small smile, "but then I remember who I'm talking to."

"Yeah," Harry laughed. "On that topic, I want you to do something for me."

"What?"

"The Champions have figured out that the second task is likely to be something more than an obstacle course," Harry said, reaching out to take her hand. "There are suspicions that someone important to each of us will be used, somehow, as part of the task. If they come to you, I want you to tell them no."
Harry crested yet another leg-killing dune, fighting against the urge to activate his armor. Still sand as far as the eye could see.

He found himself torn between admiration for the magic that had transformed this section of the Hogwarts grounds into this endless desert for, and sheer frustration at, the second task. His had been the last token from the bag, and he had last choice for his starting point.

Cedric had at least looked apologetic when he had taken the entrance labeled 'East' to begin the course, the one that looked to be a deciduous forest, while Viktor had laughed when he had taken the entrance labeled 'West' with its soft rolling hills. Fleur had taken the entrance labeled 'North' disappearing into the rocky alpine slopes as if she were born to it.

This left Harry with the 'choice' of the sandy desert under the label 'South'.

Of course, the first thing the Triwizard Officials had done was confiscate the brooms that each of them carried. The Champions had expected that, but, seriously, after fifty-seven minutes in this massive magical sandbox, a broom would be so very handy right now. At least he had spotted the man-sized scorpions before they had seen him, allowing him to avoid the creatures. Now atop the dune, an odd movement to his left caught his eye as a huge... thing heaved itself free of the sand approximately half way to the horizon before arcing back to the dunes.

This stupid desert had sandworms? Oh, he was so going to have a conversation with whoever set this thing up. He paused for a moment. Did the presence of sandworms mean that there was Spice here?

No, no, no, Harry scolded himself. Don't get distracted. Keep moving toward the goal.

Harry pulled up his GPS display, which showed he was still on the Hogwarts grounds, having apparently traveled all of 200 yards in the real world since entering the enchanted landscape. Dismissing the display, he used the 'Point Me' charm to verify Magical North still aligned with Actual North.

It did. With North verified to the best of his ability, Harry focused on the next dune top and made his way toward it, down, and then up, wondering with each step if a variant of snowshoes might make climbing the sand dune easier.

Cresting this latest dune, Harry blinked when he saw that the endless desert simply stopped perhaps twenty feet away, terminating at the edge of a grassy meadow. Chancing a glance to his rear, he could clearly see his tracks in the sand behind him, but he had not been able to see the grassland just beyond this dune until he reached this particular dune.

Weird. He added that to his list of things he wanted explained by the organizers.

Shaking his head, Harry took a step forward, coming to a complete halt when the sand between him and the meadow started writhing.

Snakes. Dozens of them intertwined and all focused on him.

~ Hey fellas, ~ hissed. ~ Want to get out of the way? I don't want to step on you. ~

~ A Speaker! ~ Multiple voices chorused. ~ Friend Hagrid did not say that there would be another Speaker. ~
Hagrid could talk to snakes? Harry was surprised to learn that tidbit of trivia. It made sense the way the big guy loved animals.

~ Speaker, not Speaker, it matters not! ~ one strident voice broke through the chorus. ~ Friend Hagrid asked we block passage. We will block the new Speaker's passage. ~

Harry knelt down to be closer to the snakes. ~ Look, fellas, I'm a wizard, I've got a wand. I know you're there, I could do horrible things to you, but I don't want to do that. I need to get past you to that meadow. I'll apologize to Hagrid, he's my friend too, but I'm going forward. ~

~ But Friend Hagrid said… ~ one voice protested.

~ Is Speaker! ~ Another pair disagreed.

~ How about I catch you guys a few dozen rats? ~ Harry asked his wand in motion, and the rats appearing between him and the snakes.

~ FOOD! ~ The chorus was back.

Harry could not help but smile, Snakes always had such one-track minds.

He stepped gingerly through the mass of reptiles as they set upon the conjured rodents.

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Twenty meters into the meadow, Harry spotted Viktor Krum standing next to an odd structure.

"Harry!" Viktor called as he approached. "I am glad you are the second to arrive, I was afraid I would have to wait."

"Good to see you too, Vik," Harry laughed, shaking the older boy's hand. "Why did you have to wait?"

"I found a puzzle," the Quidditch star admitted. "One that I could not solve without your help."

Krum gestured toward the figure that was facing north. "As we guessed, we are tasked to rescue a hostage, but I am not sure which one is for me. This girl," he pointed to the structure, which, now that he was closer, Harry could see was a small roofed building with Cho Chang standing unmoving and apparently unconscious in the doorway facing him. "She is Cedric's friend, yes?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded as he followed Krum to the west side of the small building.

"This one, I don't know who he is," Krum said gesturing to a young man who appeared to be in his 20s.

"A friend of Fleur, maybe?" Harry postulated. "He's annoyingly good looking. Are there Male Veela?"

"No," Krum said with a shake of his head. "Is likely another species, they are called Adonis. I have heard that the Veela prefer relationships with Adonis men."

"Okay, weird," Harry admitted as he made his way to the south face of the building. "Oh, Hermione."

"Yes," Krum agreed. "When I found her, I wanted her to be my hostage, but I did not know the fourth hostage and I know that you are her friend."
"Fourth?" Harry asked with a grimace, wondering why Viktor had not recognized Padma as he made his way to the eastern face of the building. Evidently, Dumbledore and the other organizers had not taken 'no' for an answer.

"Oh," he said as soon as he sighted the fourth hostage.

"I think you're right about Hermione being your hostage," Harry said gesturing to the fourth hostage. "She's mine."

A smile pulled at the corners of the professional Quidditch player's mouth. "Good."

"Vik," Harry continued hesitantly, "I've been watching you chase Hermione and not saying anything because it was… funny."

"Funny?" Krum asked, raising a single eyebrow.

"Yeah, it's hilarious," Harry admitted. "I mean, this is like the Richards/Von Doom feud running into a second generation, but now it's getting a bit too real."

"I am not worried about Richards," Krum said.

"Yeah, I figured," Harry admitted. "Have you spoken with your Godfather about Franklin Richards?"

"No, why should I?" Viktor asked.

"Do it," Harry advised. "Ask him why he doesn't strike at Reed Richards through his son anymore. You and I have become friends of a sort through this stupid contest. Franklin is my first and best friend. I'd rather you two didn't end up spending your lives trying to kill each other."

"I hardly think I would have to worry about a Muggle, Harry," Krum disagreed.

"Talk to your godfather," Harry advised.

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From the Judge's stand, Albus Dumbledore continued to stare at the displays that showed the progress of the Champions, focusing on the pair that displayed Harry Potter and Viktor Krum respectively. Why were the two waiting around talking rather than racing toward the exits of their respective courses?

He was starting to think that not adding listening charms to the spell matrix that allowed the observation of the champions had been a mistake. The two were deeply in a discussion about something.

"My student is in the lead," Karkaroff noted.

"Your student is standing next to one of mine," Dumbledore pointed out, "And Mr. Diggory is but minutes away. For whatever reason, your student chose to waste his advantage."

"I still say the water hazard Miss Delacour encountered was unfair," Madam Maxime huffed.

"You only started saying that after she fell in," Karkaroff laughed.

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Viktor disappeared from the meadow taking the exit to the south, an unconscious Hermione slung over his shoulder like the damsel in distress from a Victorian era melodrama.

Harry pondered the sheer amount of holy hell Hermione would be unleashing on Krum once she found out she had been carried like that, before shaking his head and returning his attention to the note he had found attached to his hostage's sleeve.

Champion Potter:

Congratulations. You have successfully completed the first half of your task.

You will exit to the east with your hostage with the goal of returning to the starting point. How you deal with your hostage is completely up to you. You may wake her if you so wish and have access to her inputs to your escape plan, or you may leave her in the enchanted sleep and transport her, physically or magically to the exit.

You are, of course responsible for the safety of your hostage, any injuries suffered will have a detrimental effect on your final score.

Good Luck, I expect you to do Hogwarts proud.

Minerva McGonagall

Harry shook his head at the cavalier way innocents utterly unrelated to the Triwizard could be placed into dangerous situations, while wondering why Viktor hadn't read the note attached to Hermione. Had the Latvarian been looking for… permission?

Harry contemplated his options. Just saying 'fuck it' and having a seat to wait out the event would probably not be in keeping with the intent of the magic enforcing his participation, and it could possibly hurt the girl as well.

He could try carrying her, but he doubted he would be able to manage to carry her physically for an hour without using his armor, and that surprise was one he had no intention of wasting. Levitating her would tie up his wand.

The scorpions and sandworms he had seen on his way in suggested that to be a poor choice. Even if he was not exiting via the desert he entered through, there was likely to be something on his way out that would be dangerous all on their own.

That only left waking her.

Drawing his wand, Harry concentrated on casting with as little power as possible. One of the major issues he was having with his modified wand was overpowering every spell. Leaving his hostage unable to sleep for a few days would probably not be appreciated.

"Enervate," he cast.

Tracey Davis stirred in her enchanted slumber, before blinking her eyes several times.

"Harry?" she asked, "What happened? How did I get here?"

"We're in the middle of the Second Task," Harry explained gently. "I hope they at least asked you before shanghaiing you into this mess."

"The Headmaster asked if I would be willing to assist you in the task," she nodded, stepping out of
the structure on shaky legs, leaning on Harry for support. As she exited the structure, a golden cord formed between them, binding her right wrist to his left, separated by three feet.

"And then, you were waking me up," she continued, examining their connection before looking into his eyes. "I always have the most interesting adventures with you. What do you suppose this is supposed to do?"

"My options were to carry you out or wake you and we walk out together," Harry explained. "It seems that either way, our hostages were supposed to be impediments."

The golden cord terminated on the inside of his left wrist. A few test tugs gave the impression that the connection was to the bones in his wrist, rather than the skin. Unpleasant.

"We're in second place," Harry continued, we should probably get going."

"And that," Harry explained forty minutes later, "is how you avoid a griffin."

"Oh, yes," Tracey wheezed, gasping for breath. "Running away is a wonderful tactic."

"If you want to fight the griffin, I'll lend you my wand as soon as we get disconnected," Harry snarked. "Personally, I find dropping a sonic mine and making a strategic retreat to be a perfectly reasonable tactic. Far less blood and gore, especially mine."

"My hero," she snarked back before falling away with a small yelp.

Harry felt the golden cord that connected them yank his left arm down, dragging him on the ground to the edge of a wet patch. Tracey was waist deep in some kind of oozing muck. Harry reached out with his right hand to cup a sample of the ooze. Gritty, wet, nasty. Quicksand. He felt himself relax. This was not going to be a problem.

"It's okay, Tracey, it's just quicksand."

"Quicksand?" she asked in a panic, as she settled deeper into the mire. "I'm going to die?"

"No," Harry disagreed. "Quicksand isn't as bad as its reputation. Loop the cord around your hand and I'll pull you out."

"Loop it?" she asked as she did so, "Why?"

"So that I'm not tugging directly on your wrist bones," Harry explained as he looped his own end of the cord around his hand. "Don't try standing up, just lie back and try to float, okay?"

Chest deep in the muck, Tracey fought against her panic, and tried to follow Harry's suggestion, only to sink faster. "It's not working!"

"This," Harry ground out as he tried pulling on the cord and felt himself being dragged toward the sand pit, "is NOT how quicksand works."

"Harry," she gasped as her chin touched the liquid, "help me!"

Harry dug in with his toes, trying to slow his forward motion and cast a bubblehead charm on his friend before allowing the wand to return to the sheath on his forearm. With a mental command, he activated the armor under his robes, the helmet rising from the collar to envelope his head, and his left gauntlet failing to deploy due to the golden cord emerging from his wrist.
Tracey's head disappeared under the quicksand, leaving only her upraised right hand visible. The armor finished its evaluation of the amount of force applied to his left arm from Tracey being pulled under. The Armor could overcome it, but doing so would likely damage his own hand beyond reasonable expectation of repair and would more than likely rip Tracey's arm from her shoulder.

"Shit," Harry spat eloquently as he dove into the quicksand pit after his friend. Blindly following the cord allowed him to find her, still struggling, though in no immediate danger of drowning. Harry wrapped his arms around her body and triggered his flight systems.

The reactionless thruster coughed once, and then died. A stream of profanity poured from Harry's mouth unheard by anyone other than himself. The reactionless thruster could not deal with the sloppy grit that surrounded them.

As his students disappeared into the quicksand pit, Albus Dumbledore was on his feet. "Minerva, get proctors to each of the Champions," he barked. "Do not interfere with their progress, but if anyone is in danger of death, the proctors are to step in."

"What are you doing Albus?" Karkaroff demanded. "Death is part of the contest; we all knew this going in."

"None of these students are dying while at Hogwarts, Igor," Albus said dismissively. "Not while I still breathe. Fawkes!"

The Headmaster's phoenix flashed into being over the old man's head. Reaching up to grasp the firebird's talons, Dumbledore disappeared in sheet of flame.

He appeared instantly perhaps 10 feet away from the quicksand pit, and fought through the disorientation inherent to suddenly being somewhere else. He brought his wand up, intending to empty the quicksand deposit through nothing more than his force of will, only to stop when something heaved itself free of the pit.
Dumbledore stepped back when he recognized that the new… thing resembled one of de Albo’s Earth Elementals, yet was radically different as the huge construct plodding away from the now empty pit. How?

Had de Albo take more than one student? It had taken Albus two years of study under the ancient alchemist to learn the art of creating elementals, and he had never been very good with them. How had Stark managed it? The old man sat down on a convenient stone while his phoenix looked on in confusion.

"It appears that Mr. Stark was in no need of my assistance, Fawkes," Dumbledore murmured. "We should return to the stands."

The firebird issued an encouraging song as he landed on his bonded's shoulder and flashed them away.

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Tracey blinked in amazement as the soggy grit fell away from the bubblehead charms' bubble, revealing that she was face to face with an armored form. She recognized it from Harry's drawings from the previous year to be his creation. Finding herself unable to move, she looked down to see that she was still encased in the now inexplicably gelatinous quicksand from the chest down.

Looking around, she discovered that she appeared to be embedded in the body of a huge golem. The panic that had abated with the sunlight was replaced by a completely new feeling of confusion.

Tracey counted to twenty, first in English, then in French, and then once again in Italian, and still the insane situation remained. Leaning back as much as she could to take in the whole bronze and blue faceplate of Harry's armor, she cleared her throat. "Well," she said, her voice muffled by the bubblehead charm, "this is new."

Harry ordered his armor to power down caused the helmet to retract back into its collar housing, revealing his face before mentally commanding the elemental to free his right arm so that he could cancel the bubblehead charm before asking, "You okay?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I'd almost forgotten how being around you makes life so interesting."

"To get the full affect," Harry complained, "you've got to actually be me. I think I've had all the fun I can tolerate today; let's get out of here before it gets any more interesting." He redirected his attention to his creation. "Home, Jeeves, and let's not take the scenic route.

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Four minutes later, Harry and Tracey emerged from the summer time meadow into the reality of February in Scotland, upon exiting the course, the Elemental deposited the pair on the ground before striding off, and entire sections of the body falling away to form sand piles and water puddles as it did to. Harry spotted Cedric while standing next to Fleur.

"Well, the French girl finished first," Tracey noted, examining her wrist where the golden cord had been before vanishing when they exited the course.

"How do you know she finished first?" Harry asked.

"Look beyond her shock at your golem. She is quite pleased with herself," Tracey suggested. "That's not the expression of someone who had to settle for second place."
"You're probably right," Harry admitted.

"I don't see their hostages, so I'm going to go get out of the weather," she said, moving away. "Thank you, Harry."

"No, thank you, Tracey. Go to the Medical tent and get checked out," he said as she walked away before moving to join his fellow champions.

"Are congratulations in order, Fleur?" He asked as he approached.

"You come out in the arms of a golem and the first thing you do is ask if she won?" Cedric asked incredulously. "She did win, beating me by three minutes, and I was only two minutes ahead of you. But you came out with a golem?"

"Winning is determined by more than just finishing order," the young woman disagreed. "We will have to await our scores to know who won. Although finishing first does not hurt, turning one of the traps into a form of transportation is not to be ignored. I had my challenges on the way in, while Demonte and I avoided the animals and traps on the way out."

"Viktor should be finishing soon," Cedric said gesturing to the huge screen showing the Durmstrang student's progress, still carrying the unconscious Hermione. "I wonder if he's going to be in as much trouble as I am with Cho for carrying the girl out instead of waking her like you two did."

"I was doing okay until we found that quicksand pit," Harry laughed. "And I still say quicksand doesn't work like that."

"Sod that," Cedric insisted.

"I quite agree," Fleur nodded. "Tell us about your golem."

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"So," Padma said as she leaned back onto Harry on the sofa they shared. "Tracey, eh?"

The Ravenclaw common room was almost empty with so many parties going on in the castle in celebration of the completion of the 2nd task.

"My fault," Harry admitted, "I never expected them to go after someone else after you said no."

"Hannah thinks I should be jealous," Padma continued, "because you ended up in the arms of an elemental, cuddled face to face with your ex from last year after asking me to bow out."

"And?" Harry asked.

"I just remember that you both almost got killed in the Task, and before that she was the one who dumped you," she grinned, "and I'm suddenly okay with the whole thing."

"You could be a little jealous," Harry teased.

"Well," Padma said, tapping her chin with the forefinger of her left hand. "Tracey does have those really nice shoes she wore to the Yule ball. I could be jealous of them if you'd like."

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"To Fleur!" Cedric toasted raising his glass to the blushing young woman.

"To Fleur!" Viktor and Harry echoed, lifting their own glasses.

"Merci!" the French girl smiled. "I shall spend my winnings taking Demonte out for a meal, and let him know that he owes it to all of you."

"Of course," Viktor smiled. "Demonte will spend his time asking you to approach me for tickets to my matches."

"I should never have let him speak with you," Fleur huffed. "You have awakened the Quidditch fan that I thought had died with maturity and experience."

"It is my gift and curse," Viktor said with a smile.

"We can get tickets from you?" Cedric asked with sudden interest.

"I have made arrangements for all of you to have tickets available at any of my games. It is the least I could do for those I competed against," Viktor laughed, "I am embarrassed to admit that when our names came out of the cup, I imagined myself a sure winner. I, the great Viktor Krum, in competition with a fashion obsessed woman, an average quidditch player from Hogwarts and," his eyes lit upon Harry for a moment, "a child."

"Watch it, old man," Harry snarked.

"Silence infant," Krum responded, "I, the great Viktor Krum, am humbling myself here. Imagine my shock when I finished second in the first task, and fourth in the second?" Shaking his head, he continued. "My arrogance is crushed… At least until the next time I am racing for the Snitch!"

"Such humility," Fleur laughed. "Should I return to the runways of Paris, I will ensure that all of you have access to my shows."

"And you are all invited to New York whenever you want," Harry said. "I'll show you the sights and get you all meals by Fin Fang Foom."

"The dragon you think is a chef?" Fleur asked.

"The chef I know to be a dragon," Harry disagreed.

"Fleur," Cedric interjected. "This is Harry. He got past the dragon by waving a flag, he escaped a pit of quicksand by changing it into a golem. If he says he knows a dragon chef, he knows a dragon chef."

"Yes," Viktor agreed. "When it comes to Harry, crazy is normal."

"Thanks a lot guys," Harry said drily.

"You think you've got troubles?" Cedric laughed. "Viktor is giving us tickets to his matches, Fleur is giving us tickets to her shows, you are offering us a tour of New York and a meal prepared by a Dragon, and what can I offer the lot of you? Anyone interested in seeing my Dad's office at the Ministry?"

The four champions shared a laugh before Fleur became very solemn. "We must be very cautious with the final task."

"You know what it will be?" Harry asked.
"Olympe Maxime, is many things, but subtle she is not," Fleur sighed. "She probably does not even know that she let slip the secret for the third task. It is dueling. In three months, we will be facing each other in the ring."

"She probably does not even know that she let slip the secret for the third task. It is dueling. In three months, we will be facing each other in the ring."

Sirius Black stood in the May sunshine, watching quietly as the old woman rose on her toes to kiss Steve Rogers, before the hero hugged her and joined him as they left the property.

"This place is huge," Sirius noted as he followed Steve Rogers on the path to the property line. "You know, it's really hard to believe that you and Lady Crichton are the same age."

"I blame the super soldier formula and a dip into the North Atlantic in the winter," Rogers responded. "Being 75 while looking like you're 25 isn't as good a deal as it would seem. Almost everyone I knew is dead now, or the few still alive like Jacqui just look at me like they can't believe I'm really the same person they knew."

"I got a small taste of that when I got out of prison," Black admitted.

"Anyway, thanks for coming out here to meet me, it couldn't have been easy leaving Greer and your little girl," Rogers continued, refusing to dwell on his situation any longer.

"I've got pictures," Sirius grinned. "I can spare a little time away from my angels to see Harry at the tournament. I've got plenty of time to achieve my new mission in life."

"New mission?" Steve asked.

"Teaching Jessica to say away from men like me," Black grinned. "That's a vital lesson for any young girl to learn."

"I'm glad you could spare the time," Rogers smiled, refraining from outright agreeing with Black. "With Tony in the hospital, we're going to be all the family Harry has for this tournament thing. How are we getting to Scotland, anyway? Driving or train?"

"Oh," Sirius grinned, placing his hand on the other man's shoulder. "Much faster than that."

The sudden transition had Rogers rolling away from their arrival point, and coming into a combat stance with his shield off his back and ready. The big blond man blinked at the utter lack of attacks coming his way.

"Sorry," he said ashamedly as he returned his shield to his back. "Reflexes. During the war, we worked with some wizards on a few operations; we always came out in the middle of something nasty. You should have warned me."

"Warning you wouldn't have been as funny," Black observed. "Or as educational. I had no idea that wizards and muggles worked together in the war."

"Yeah, you Wandies had quite a few combat teams, a few squadrons of broom pilots and they were part of the protective services for the Royal family, Churchill and the other heads of state," Rogers explained. "Where are we anyway?"

Sirius grinned and gestured broadly, "welcome to the cosmopolitan wonderland that is Hogsmeade."
"Hogsmeade?" Rogers mused while looking down the nearly deserted cobblestone street, "Abe said he owned a bar in Hogsmeade."

"Abe?" Sirius asked.

"One of my wizard teammates during the war," Rogers explained. "When we assaulted Nurmengard we always operated in pairs, one wizard, one trooper. Abe and I were practically joined at the hip for the entire 6 weeks it took to bust into that castle. Good old Abe. He'd be over 100 years old by now."

"You wouldn't be talking about Aberforth Dumbledore, would you?" Sirius asked in amazement.

"Yeah, that was his full name, but everyone just called him Abe," Steve's face split into a grin. "Everyone except his brother Albus. Albus was such a stiff that he insisted on using everyone's full name, all the time, which is probably why Abe and the other magicals pranked him so much."

"You're telling me that you were at Nurmengard with Albus and Aberforth Dumbledore?"

"Well, me, those two and about seventy others," Steve agreed. "I was just one of the pair in the goofy outfits."

"Steve," Sirius said as he led the living legend into the town, "the official meet and greet at the castle isn't until noon. Before we head to the castle, I think there is someone you need to see."

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"What do you want, Black?" Aberforth Dumbledore called out from behind his bar. "I don't open for lunch until eleven."

"I've brought someone to see you," Sirius said, standing to the side so that Rogers could enter the bar.

"Abe?" the hero asked incredulously, "is that you? Man, you got old."

The old man behind the bar dropped the glass he had been cleaning and blinked owlishly. "Steve?" he gasped, "is that you? How? We saw you die!"

"Nah," Rogers shook his head. "You all saw Zemo's flying bomb explode. I was blown free and dropped in the Atlantic."

"You survived that?" Aberforth asked rhetorically.

"Clean living," Rogers grinned. "Though the Super Soldier formula probably didn't hurt. I ended up frozen, they only found me and thawed me out about 10 years ago. I'd have come sooner, but you and Albus were both already older than dirt, I never imagined either of you would still be around, not after I found out so many of the old gang were gone."

The barkeep made his way around the bar to pull Rogers into a hug. "It's so good to see you. How did you find me?"

"That's my fault," Sirius interjected, reminding the pair that he was still there. "I surprised Steve by apparating him without warning, and he just rolled into a combat stance when we arrived. Then he started telling me war stories the way you old codgers do when you get excited, and he mentioned someone owned a bar in Hogsmeade named Abe."
"I'm here to see a good friend's son compete in the Triwizard Tournament," Rogers added. "Though I'm not clear on why they would call it the Triwizard when there are four competitors."

"Wait, you're associated with Harry Stark?" Aberforth asked, putting things together.

"Yeah," Rogers nodded. "Good kid, worries a lot about doing the right thing."

Aberforth frowned. "He's made a strong showing, and surprised a lot of people, but the final task doesn't really play to his strengths."

"Really?" Sirius asked, his Godfather instincts coming to the fore, "How so?"

"He's three years younger than the other competitors and much smaller, even smaller than the girl," Dumbledore explained. "The final task is a Dueling competition, and where he might be able to keep up in the wanded fights, the smart money says that the older competitors will go to Staff fighting against him, since Hogwarts doesn't teach it."

"Staff fighting?" Rogers asked. "Ranged or close in like you guys during the war?"

"Close in, for the most part," Aberforth explained. Upon seeing Roger's grin at this information, his eyes widened. "Maybe I should place a few bets."

"Me too," Sirius chimed in. "Is Albus allowing betting on the grounds?"

"Albus is here too?" Steve asked.

"Oh, Merlin's Beard," Abe swore. "You and Albus, in one place after all these years… Wait a few minutes before you leave, I need to close up the bar for the day. There is no way I'm missing this show."

"Miss the show?" Steve asked. "You clearly weren't expecting to go to the contest. What show are you expecting?"

"After you were 'killed'," Abe said as he ushered the pair from his bar, "Albus let it be known that he was responsible for Gellert's defeat."

"Well," Steve said in a confused manner, "he did cast the spell that finally put Grindelwald down."

"After you beat Gellert over the head and shoulders with that shield of yours," Abe grinned though his massive beard. "I only got away with that because Bucky stole his wand," Rogers protested.

Abe blinked in shock. "Bucky stole his wand? Not Albus? Did he…?"

"Why would that matter?" Steve asked. "But no, Albus was getting himself free of some kind of plant that had grabbed him with thorny vines. Jackson Murphy and I tried to buy Albus some time by distracting Grindelwald with magic and punches and while we were doing that, Bucky dropped down from the rafters to snatch the bastard's wand away from him."

"Bloody hell," Abe's grin returned. "Did Bucky survive as well?"

"No," Steve said with a shake of his head. "No, his body was never found."

"Hmm," Abe nodded. "We should get to the castle."
"Steve!" Harry called as he approached his mentor. Thanks for coming!"

"Wouldn't have missed it, Trooper," Rogers responded.

The younger man leaned in and whispered, "Is Dad okay?"

"He'll be fine, Harry," Rogers assured the boy. "He just needs some time to get control of his body back. Possession takes a lot out of a man."

Harry nodded. If anyone knew about that sort of thing, it was Steve Rogers. "The final task is going to be a round of duels."

"Dueling seems a bit extreme for a school competition," Rogers mused. "back in my day,"

"When dinosaurs roamed the earth," Harry interjected helpfully.

"When young idiots didn't forget that summer was coming, and so was morning PT," the hero continued, "we confined our fights to the school yard and back alleys. I'm not sure which is better."

"These are duels," Harry explained. "Not fights. If anything, they are more like the sparing you and T'challa do where you can both cut loose to see which of you is better without worrying if you're going to cripple the other guy. We all pretty much get along."

"Steven?"

The pair turned to find the Headmaster standing behind them, his mouth open in shock.

"Albus!" Rogers exclaimed, reaching out to capture the old man's hand. "It's good to see you. When Abe told me you were still alive, I couldn't believe it. How are you doing?"

"How?" the old man faltered, "we saw you and James die when Zemo's… machine exploded."

The second reminder of Bucky's death in a day gave Roger's pause. He sighed before continuing, "I survived the explosion, but being dunked into the North Atlantic put me into something like suspended animation, probably due to the Super Soldier formula. I was found and thawed out about 10 years ago."

"And James?" Dumbledore asked, idling fingering the wand within his robes.

"His body was never found," Rogers explained. "And he wasn't enhanced with the Super Soldier formula. I don't believe that there is any way he could have survived… But enough about the past, I had no idea you were one of Harry's teachers."

"Alas," Albus sighed, "I rarely get to teach any longer, not since I became the Headmaster. I'm afraid my time is consumed by administration."

If either of the adults heard the snort that escaped Harry, they made no mention of it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! In first place, with seventy-four points - Mr. Harry Stark, of Hogwarts School!" The cheers and applause sent birds from the Forbidden Forest fluttering into the sky. "In second place, with sixty-eight points, Miss Fleur Delacour, of the Beauxbatons..."
Academy, and tied for third place with sixty-six points each, Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute and Mr. Cedric Diggory of Hogwarts school!”

Ludo Bagman waited theatrically for the applause to die down. "Our Champions are grouped in such a way that the 50 points the winner of the third task will be the overall winner. In the first task, we witnessed our champion's prowess when facing the most dangerous of the magical beasts, the Dragon. In the second we watched as they demonstrated to us all how well they could cope with a changing environment, placing themselves in the defense of another;"

Again, Bagman was drowned out by the cheering and applause, and had to wait.

"In this third task," he continued, "they will face each other in a series of duels. For each round lots will be drawn to determine who will be the challenger. The challenger will choose both his opponent and the method of the duel."

There are three possibilities for the duels. The first being, of course, wands. The duelers will meet in a regulation dueling pit to face each other in classic wizarding combat." Bagman waited for the crowd to quiet down before continuing. "The second option will be staff fighting, the traditional way for Wizards of old to face each other."

The prospect of staff fighting brought the audience to their feet with thunderous cheers.

"And the third possible method of dueling will be the oldest and least well known of them all," Bagman continued. "Grappling. A pair of unarmed fighters enter the pit and only one comes out under his or her own power."

"This will be a single elimination event. When a champion loses, he, or she, is done. None of the matches will have a time limit, and all wins must be by submission or rendering your opponent unconscious. All of this means what we will have two matches immediately and then another in an hour, allowing the winners of each match to recuperate before facing each other."

"Headmistress, if you would?" Bagman asked as he offered an ornate bowl to the huge woman. Madame Maxime reached into the bowl and extracted a slip of paper which she handed to Ludo.

"The Challenger for the first Match will be," Bagman paused as he unfolded the slip of paper so as to read it, "Viktor Krum!"

The cheering from the Durmstrang students exploded.

"Now, Viktor," Ludo asked. "what are your choices?"

"I choose the staff!" Viktor answered. "And I will fight, Harry Stark!"

Viktor strode into the glowing circle, a wide grin on his face.

For his part, Harry was examining the 6-foot long shaft of ash in his hands. He had already given the staff a few experimental swings, and was puzzling how they were supposed to use it. What made it a 'wizard's staff' anyway? That sounded like the beginning of a dirty joke. Surely, beating each other senseless was not the goal of the duel, was it?

"I am sorry, Harry," Viktor said, "But unlike Hogwarts, Durmstrang teaches dueling with Wizard's staffs. I will try to make this as quick and painless as possible."
"Thanks Viktor," Harry nodded. "I really appreciate that. Am I holding it right?"

The umpire, a witch from Beauxbatons entered the ring. "If the two of you are done with your trash talk, the match will be ended, with submission or knockout. Fatalities will result in immediate disqualification and the criminal investigation of the survivor. You may begin."

Harry watched the larger boy as he went into a familiar guard stance. Oh, he thought, so you use these things like pugil sticks. Harry shifted his staff to a two-handed grip. I can work with that.

Viktor moved forward in a supremely confident manner, one that evaporated as soon as Harry drove the butt of his staff into the older competitor's stomach, followed immediately by a sweep of his legs with the other end.

Krum found himself on his back, trying hard not to vomit, his staff well out of reach as Harry knelt next to him and placed the butt of his own staff lightly against Viktor's throat.

"If you're trying to lull me into a false sense of security, you're doing a bang-up job," Stark said with a grin. "Hogwarts doesn't teach fighting with these things, but I've got a trainer back home who loves them and beats me about the head and shoulders all the time."

"Damn you, Harry," Viktor grumbled. "I submit."

"Winner, Harry Stark of Hogwarts," the umpire announced in an amused tone. "A legal win, Mr. Stark, but traditionally, staff duels involve casting at least a bit of magic."

Stark stood up and offered Krum his hand.

"You can cast from these things?" Harry asked, examining the staff anew. "Cool. Can someone show me how?"

"I do not know why I expected you to do anything the normal way, Harry," Viktor grumbled good-naturedly. "Come, I will demonstrate casting with a staff while my ego recovers from the wounds it received."

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"I must admit," Fleur said conversationally as she whipped her wand about in familiar motions. "When I heard Viktor select the staff for his challenge, I thought I would end up facing him."

"Maybe you'll still have a chance," Cedric grinned as he went through his own warm up exercises. "I suppose that the judges will need some method of determining third place."

"Third place?" Fleur asked imperiously. "Do you really believe yourself that capable? I thought your Hufflepuff house was supposed to be humble."

"It's not bragging if you can do it," Diggory laughed. "Still, I'm not sure if I want to challenge someone who can create a golem to a wand fight, and now that I've seen him use a staff, I'm thinking grappling will be my best choice for dealing with Harry after we're done here."

"Ooh, two sweaty boys all oiled up…" Fleur teased, "the prospect of that almost makes me want to let you win."

"The match will be ended," the referee from Durmstrang announced in a tone of supreme boredom, "with submission or knockout. Fatalities will result in immediate disqualification and the criminal investigation of the survivor. Loss of your wand constitutes a knock out. Take your positions."
Cedric moved to his mark in the pit, forcing himself into a relaxed state. While waiting for his competitor to do the same, in his mind, he ran through his dueling coach's mantra. Shield, attack, defend. Repeat as needed until your opponent surrendered. Shield, attack, defend.

Those word were still echoing in his mind when the referee signaled the start of the duel. Cedric's wand was in motion, anchoring a dueler's shield to his left forearm before unleashing a low powered Confringo at the ground at Fleur's feet.

He missed. Fleur was in motion, having foregone shielding entirely. His eyes widened when he saw the sphere of fire flying toward his head. She hadn't cast a fire spell, rather, she had thrown it from her off arm.

So, Veela can throw fire, some small part of his mind noted. Good to know. He raised his shield hoping it would deal with the fireball, when his feet flew up from underneath him, resulting in a painful crash to the ground.

Before Cedric had begun to gather his wits, the French girl was standing over him with an evil grin, placing her foot on his right wrist, pinning his wand hand to the ground, while she aimed her wand between his eyes.

"Pax, yes?" she asked.

His options ran through Cedric's mind. Few of them were good, and none of them were honorable. "I yield," he responded.

"Winner, Fleur Delacour of Beauxbatons," the umpire announced before exiting the pit.

Cedric accepted Fleur's hand to help him to his feet. "I'm not sure throwing fireballs was strictly fair," he grumbled good naturedly.

"No rules against it," Fleur noted. "In fact, I recommend it. You should always throw fireballs in duels."

"Should I point out that humans can't throw fireballs?" Cedric asked as the pair left the confines of the pit.

"How did young Harry put it when we made note of the advantage his armor offered him?" Fleur asked rhetorically, "ah, yes. 'that sounds like a whole lot of not my problem'."

"Fine," Cedric agreed. "Can you tell me how you managed to pull my feet out from under me? I know it wasn't a summoning charm."

"It actually was a summoning charm," Fleur disagreed.

"But you can't summon people," Cedric protested.

"I didn't summon you," she explained. "I summoned your boots."

"My boots."

"Yes," she agreed.

"You summoned my boots," Cedric demanded.

"It's not bragging if you can do it," Fleur laughed.
"I guess I deserved that," Diggory admitted. "If I were you I wouldn't put much hope in being able to pull that with Harry. I'd wager he's already figured out a counter for it."

"I've got my own special plan for Harry," Fleur's smile grew wider. "Don't worry about that."

"We've seen two magnificent matches so far, with Harry Stark of Hogwarts and Fleur Delacour of Beauxbatons proving themselves worthy of the final match. The final will be in one hour, but first we much find out which of our finalist will be the Challenger, and what the challenge will be. Headmaster Karkaroff, if you would?"

Bagman accepted the piece of paper drawn from the same ornate bowl used earlier. "The Challenger for the final match will be," Bagman paused as he unfolded the slip of paper so as to read it, "Fleur Delacour!"

Rather than a single school, the entire stands erupted into cheers.

"Now, Miss Delacour," Bagman asked. "what is your choice?"

"I have seen Harry wield a staff, and I have seen him use his wand for some most impressive magic," Fleur answered. "I find myself following the suggestion of Cedric Diggory. Harry Stark and I will grapple!"

"So, wrestling with a girl, eh?" Sirius asked with a large grin.

"I thought we had at least a year or two before Harry fell to such depravity," Steve Rogers agreed.

"You two are hilarious," Harry snorted as he stepped into a singlet before pulling the garment up so the straps were on his shoulders. "What's the grease for?"

"It's oil, Harry," Sirius supplied. "It's not required you use it, but tradition calls for it."

"It will make both of you harder to grip," Steve explained. "This changes the wrestling from a test of strength to one of skill."

"Wonderful," Harry groused as he took a handful of the fluid and began rubbing it on his arms.

"Don't forget your hair," Sirius directed, "and the outfit."

"What are the rules for fighting women?" Steve asked, his 'I'm teaching you something, so pay attention,' voice in use.

"Protect the jewels, and fight them as hard as you would a man, if not harder," Harry recited. "Carol drove that one home."

"Carol?" Sirius asked.

"Carol Danvers," Steve explained. "I don’t think you've met her yet. Former Air Force officer, one weekend when I was tied up with a broken leg, I got her to run greasy-boy here through his paces."

"She thought I was sandbagging her," Harry interjected. "She ended up chasing me around the compound zapping me in the butt with those freaky powers of hers."
Harry's remanences were interrupted by a flash. Blinking his eyes, he spotted a grinning Sirius with a camera.

"What?" Sirius asked. "Did you really think I was going to let you get covered in oil and not take pictures to share with Tony? Smile!"

Harry had to endure another 10 minutes of photography.

Okay, I've got to ask," Harry said as he entered the dueling pit to find Fleur waiting for him. "Why the oiled-up fight?"

"Simple logic really," Fleur flexed in the sunlight. "I've seen what you can do with a staff, and if your golem is anything to go by, your wand work is not to be ignored."

The oil on her skin highlighted every single curve the beautiful young woman had. It took all of Harry's concentration to look beyond how... shiny she was.

"Miss Delacour, if you could hold your allure back until the match actually starts it would be appreciated, you are rather distracting the audience," the referee from Durmstrang requested before she held her wand to her own throat and cast "Sonorous!" before continuing; "This is the final bout of the final task of the Triwizard Tournament, and it will end with either submission or knockout. Fatalities will result in immediate disqualification and the criminal investigation of the survivor. Take your positions."

Harry moved to his mark. "Allure?"

"A Veela talent," Fleur explained. "It allows control of the minds of weak men. I have tested my allure on Viktor, Cedric and you, and all of you are resistant to it, you need not worry about that, Harry."

"Oh," he nodded still marveling at how her oil slicked clothing conformed to her body. "That's good."

"Yes," Fleur agreed shaking her head enthusiastically.

He was so focused on her movement, Harry never noticed when the amused referee directed the start of the match. Suddenly, Fleur was no longer across the ring from him, but so close he could feel her breath on his right ear as he looked down into her insanely impressive cleavage. "Of course, you are fourteen years old," she whispered. "I believe a power far superior to my allure has you now."

"Wha?" Harry asked.

"Three minutes, twenty-five seconds," Rogers noted. "In direct hand to hand combat with a young woman who appeared to have no training at all, you lasted all of three minutes and twenty-five seconds."

Harry sat in the Quidditch changing room, his head down in feigned embarrassment as those wonderful three minutes and twenty-five seconds ran through his mind, "Sorry."

Rogers just shook his head, while Sirius offered a huge grin. "I didn't notice a whole lot of fighting on your part, Harry..."
"Maybe we need to put in some extra hand to hand time into PT this summer," Harry offered.

"I'm guessing I'll need to get Simon Williams to come in and give you some one on one lessons," Steve agreed.

"Simon?" Harry asked perking up. "But he… I mean, yeah, he does a lot of hand to hand, but he's… I'm not equipped to deal with…"

"Simon will provide you with the acting lessons you so clearly need," Rogers laughed. "Now, I know you and young Mr. Richards both think I'm 'older than dirt',"

"You heard that?" Harry cringed.

"Oh, I heard it," Steve agreed, offering an evil smile. "I also remember it, and I remember that summer PT is coming back, and paybacks can be epic. I also remember that, despite not having personally been fourteen since dinosaurs roamed the Earth, I would have given my right arm to have a girl all oiled up and crawling on top of me like that French girl was doing to you."

"I quite agree, Harry," Sirius interjected. "This 'oh my, I have failed' routine of yours is completely unconvincing… and don't think we missed the way your attention was completely diverted while she suplexed you."

"It was pretty good," Harry admitted with a grin. "I had a real advantage in not caring about the stupid tournament."

"Not quite the advantage you imagine, Harry," Steve cautioned.

"Why?" the boy asked.

"We happened to notice that your two girlfriends were not quite as amused as Steve and I," Sirius laughed.

"Oh, hell," Harry breathed as he realized his error.

"Though, in fairness, I think it was a tossup if they were angrier with the French girl for being all curvy and oiled up, or with you for noticing," Steve suggested helpfully.

"Get cleaned up," Sirius said, tossing a towel at Harry. "The awards ceremony is in twenty minutes. You need to congratulate the Frenchie, and then face the music with your girlfriends. Steve and I will be there to lend you moral support and laugh."

"He means 'Laugh a whole lot'." Steve Rogers clarified.

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"What did I miss?" Harry asked as he arrived for the awards ceremony.

"We are not speaking to you," Cedric sniffed.

Harry stopped in mid step. Attitude from Cedric? "What did I do?"

"You wrestled with hot oiled girl," Viktor growled.

"And not once did you offer to allow either of us to tag in," Cedric grinned.

"Selfish bastard," Viktor laughed.
"Oh, you guys are hilarious." Harry looked around. "Where's Fleur?"

"Didn't you see enough of her already?" Viktor snickered.

"See enough of whom?" Fleur asked. Freshly showered, robed, and coiffed, she approached the three young men from behind.

"These two think they're funny," Harry explained.

"It is the curse of the male gender," Fleur allowed. "If you could all at least try to act your ages, perhaps the ceremony can begin."

As if on cue, Bagman took the stage in front of the champions.

"Welcome to the awards ceremony for the Triwizard Tournament," Bagman announced, his amplified voice echoing off the castle's walls. "We've witnessed a magnificent display of skill, cunning and, yes, even team work among our Champions. Our winner is Miss Fleur Delacour of the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic with a total of 118 points. Miss Delacour has demonstrated admirable magical skill, guile, and even a dose of feminine wiles, as Harry Stark of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry can attest."

Bagman suppressed the wide grin that young Stark's suggestion of "Bite Me," inspired.

"Her winning has secured for her the grand prize of the competition," Bagman continued. "One Thousand Galleons, the Triwizard Cup, and of course the eternal glory of being the Supreme Champion of the reborn Triwizard Tournament."

"Harry Stark of Hogwarts has won second place and 200 Galleons with a total of 99 points, while Viktor Krum, of the Durmstrang Institute and Mr. Cedric Diggory of the Hogwarts school finish in a shared third place, winning 100 Galleons each with their final scores of 78 points. Each of the runners up will receive the prestigious Triwizard Medal from the British Ministry to commemorate their achievements. Barty, if you will?"

Barty Crouch, the representative of the British Ministry of Magic, stepped up behind Harry, and looped a broad ribbon over his head. Harry hardly notice when the man took hold of the medal that hung from the ribbon and pulled it hard into Harry's chest.

Harry was about to protest the clinch the man pulled him into when he felt the odd sensation of a hook behind his navel before oblivion claimed him.

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A/N: I fully intended for this chapter to finish after Voldemort's regained his body, but that scene has been on my word processor for a month and just isn't coming together.

It's Christmas time, I missed the 10th anniversary of this Fic back on 7 December, so I decided to just end it with the kidnapping, and publish this beast (besides, it was shaping up to be an 18k word chapter).

Happy holidays to everyone. Hope you like what I've done.
Harry woke to the sensation of being jabbed in the left forearm. Blinking into awareness, he found a man he didn't recognize collecting blood from a wound in that forearm using a small crystal vial. It was odd, he thought through the haze. This new guy looked to be wearing the type of robes that Ministry guy, Crouch, always wore. Then his attention was drawn back to the still oozing wound on his arm. What was going on?

Harry's head swam as the unknown man moved away from him, carrying the stolen blood sample. Trying to focus, Harry discovered just how he was remaining upright despite the dizziness he was experiencing. He was tied to some kind of statue and a few glances told him he was in a cemetery. Tied to a headstone statue in a cemetery? Oh, yeah, Harry told himself, this could not possibly be good.

Harry issued the mental command to power his armor, relying on the ceremonial robes he wore to hide the changes. The armor's AI made silent note of the wound on his forearm, and as the shell extended down his arm, Harry felt the sting of an antiseptic being applied to the wound, followed almost immediately by a chilled numbness as a liquid bandage was applied and instantly dried in place. Harry watched as the stranger made his way to a bubbling cauldron and began an incantation of some kind. That made no sense to him, as none of the potions he had brewed under Snape, nor the alchemical brews prepared under De Albo had required an incantation. Harry's eyes widened when the obvious lunatic used his wand to cut his own left arm off at the elbow, allowing the severed limb to fall into the brew before adding a few drops of Harry's blood and stepped away from the cauldron.

It was the shock of seeing a golem of some kind rise from the bubbling, steaming potion that finally washed away the dizziness and confusion Harry had been floundering in. He needed to get out of here. He started up his flight systems. Of course, he hadn't tried them out in free flight before, but given the level of insanity he was witnessing, better to risk untested flight than to test himself against the craziness that was here.

Unfortunately, it took took his 'improved prototype' flight systems ten minutes to go from cold iron to flight capable. He was going to have to survive at least that long.

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The reborn… thing announced itself to be 'Lord Voldemort', and called for his Death Eaters to attend him. After they arrived he restored the arm his minion had sacrificed to create his body, before
punishing his kneeling troops for crimes real and imagined.

It was only at the 7-minute mark he turned his attention to Harry.

"Now untie him, Barty, and give him back his wand."

The unknown wizard, (Barty? Wasn't that the Ministry guy's name?) raised his new silver hand and with a single swipe, cut through the ropes tying Harry to the gravestone.

Gracefully landing on his feet, considerations of just plain old-fashioned running for it flit through Harry's mind, but the Death Eaters had closed ranks, forming a tighter circle around him and the snake man, cutting off that avenue.

Barty held up Harry's wand, to show his master the changes made to the focus.

"Really, Harry?" Voldemort sneered, "You decorate your wand like a school girl? I thought better of 'the boy who lived."

"The 'boy who lived' is a myth," Harry responded. "One made up by a manipulative old man to explain away something he didn't understand, and one believed by idiots unable to think for themselves. I thought better of you, Tom Riddle."

Harry's wand was pressed into his right hand by the wizard called 'Barty'. For whatever reason, Barty didn't notice, or made no mention that Harry's hand was now encased in an armored gauntlet.

"I am Lord Voldemort!" the reborn Dark Lord thundered. "What do you mean, the 'boy who lived' is a myth?

"There were only two people who survived whatever happened that night," Harry said, whipping his wand toward the ground feeling his magic seeking release. "You and me. No one interviewed me about what happened, and I doubt they talked to you, given that just about everyone thought you were dead. So, where did the story that everyone knows, come from? Who profited by it? I certainly didn't. You clearly didn't."

A two-tone sound played in Harry's left ear to indicate that his repulsors were on line, fully powered, good for a dozen discharges. With a thought, he ordered the armor's AI to select targets for optimal results and had the attack program queued up. Keep the idiot talking while the flight systems finished their boot up, Harry told himself.

"Are you claiming that you didn't destroy my body?" the self-styled Dark Lord demanded.

"I have no idea what happened that night," Harry admitted. "I was 15 months old for god's sake. I'd likely only recently learned to manage my bowel movements. What is more likely? That you lost a fight to a toddler or that you ran afoul of a trap set by the Potters?"

Harry took a bit of satisfaction from the way Riddle's jaw worked soundlessly at the thought that everything he believed about his 'death' might be wrong. Now then, once the Dark Dink got over his crisis of faith, he would press the duel in order to prove his power to the assembled minions, likely leading off with the Killing Curse.

Would his armor shield against the Killing Curse? Probably best not to find out. How to deal with Riddle? His body was a result of a combination of ritual and potions and… Magic.

Having never fought with a wand, Harry considered pulling out some of the spells Stephen Strange had taught him… but could he evoke the hand signs from within his armor? Something else that he'd
never thought about and really didn't have time to figure out.

Still, the wand was in his hand… and the armor had interfaced the vibranium handle into its own magical amplifying network. Yet another system he hadn't had time to fully test. Still…

"We bow to each other, Harry," said Voldemort, bending a little, but keeping his snakelike face upturned to Harry. "Come now, the niceties must be observed… Dumbledore would like you to show manners… Bow to death, Harry…"

The Death Eaters were laughing. Voldemort's lipless mouth was smiling. Harry mirrored the dark lord's movements. It cost him nothing and ate time. 80 seconds to go.

"Very good," said Voldemort softly, "And now you face me, like a man… straight-backed and proud, the way your father died…

Harry refrained from pointing out that Voldemort had never met his father, who was very much alive, and like as not facing off against a foe far more frightening and powerful than this strutting poser.

"And now - we duel."

The reborn Dark Lord moved, "Avada Kedavra!"

Afterward, Harry would be unable to explain just why he chose the spell he did. Perhaps his earlier musings about the composition of Voldemort's new body had played a part. Abandoning his first inclination to attempt to disarm the older wizard, Harry's simultaneous response to Voldemort's casting was "Finite Incantatem!" followed immediately by a silent order for his helmet to extend, eye ports to iris shut, head's up display to enable, and his emergency runic shield to activate.

A jet of green light issued from Voldemort's wand just as a jet of blue light blasted from Harry’s. The two spells met in midair… and merged. Suddenly Harry’s wand was vibrating as though an electric charge were surging through it; his armored hand seized up around it; he couldn’t have released it if he’d wanted to - and a narrow beam of light connected the two wands, neither blue nor green, but bright, deep gold. Harry, following the beam with his astonished gaze, saw that Voldemort’s long white fingers too were gripping a wand that was shaking and pulsating.

And then Harry felt his feet lift from the ground. Had his flight systems suddenly engaged? No, he saw that Voldemort was also raising into the air. The two wands connected by that threaded cord of shimmering golden light. The pair glided away from the tombstones and came to rest on a patch of ground that was clear and free of graves…

Voldemort's Death Eaters were shouting; they were asking the Dark Lord for instructions. Again, they closed in, reforming the circle, some of them drawing their wands.

The golden cable connecting Harry and his opponent splintered. The wands remained connected, an innumerable number of threads bloomed from the connection, crisscrossing all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a cage of light, beyond which the Death Eaters waited, their words strangely muffled.

"Do nothing!" Voldemort shrieked to the Death Eaters, and Harry saw his red eyes wide with astonishment at what was happening, saw him fighting to break the thread of light still connecting his wand with Harry’s; Harry held onto his wand more tightly, with both hands, and the golden thread remained unbroken. "Do nothing unless I command you!" Voldemort shouted to the Death Eaters.

And then an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air… It seemed to come from every single
thread of the golden web forming around Harry and Voldemort.

It was the sound of hope to Harry… the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life… He felt as though the song were inside him instead of just around him… It was the sound he connected with his father… with Pepper… with Jarvis. It was the sound of home, of safety, of… belonging.

Harry’s wand began to vibrate more powerfully than ever… and the shaft of magic between him and Voldemort changed too… it was as though large beads of light were sliding up and down between the connected wands. Harry felt his wand vibrate in his hand as the light beads began to slide slowly and steadily his way… The direction of the beams movement was now toward him, from Voldemort, and he felt his wand shudder angrily…

Harry concentrated. He wanted, needed his spell to land. The vibranium wire wrapped around the handle of his wand went cool, then cold, enough so that he could feel it from within his gauntlet. The closest bead of light changed color from gold to a blazing silver before racing down the connection toward Voldemort, absorbing the other beads as it overtook them, becoming brighter and brighter until it became impossible to look at directly.

Harry pushed his magic down the connection as hard as he could, putting everything Steven Strange, Mistress Harkness, and his teachers at Hogwarts had ever taught him into his casting. The blazing silver star reached the tip of Voldemort’s wand… and then consumed it.

The reborn Dark Lord’s red eyes widened with shock as the silver whatever it was jumped the gap that the destruction of Voldemort’s wand had created, and the man… vanished along with the mass of magic, leaving only a wet spot and a mangled lump of flesh that might have once been a man’s forearm.

A palpable shock rushed through the assembled Death Eaters, with several of them screaming their disbelief at the seeming destruction of their master. It was that shouting that reminded Harry they were there. As he turned his attention to the men wearing masks, several of them started raising their wands.

That was all Harry needed to see. He instructed the armor to holster his wand and triggered the AI’s preprogrammed attack process, relaxing his arms as the Armor took control of his upper body to fire off repulsor bursts into the crowd for maximum effect.

Harry’s armor chimed its notification that it had finally achieved a GPS lock, determining his location. "Upon completion of attack program, plot fastest return to Hogwarts and execute." He ordered.

With the last thrum of repulsor discharge, the flight systems triggered, and Harry rocketed into the sky. For Harry, the exultation of flight replaced the terror of the fight.

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Lucius Malfoy ignored the panicked reactions of his fellows and carefully aimed his wand at the boy that had just launched himself into the air… somehow.

Truth be told, he did not welcome the return of his master to life. He had become comfortable in his role as a power behind the throne of the Minister, and never wanted to step down to simply being a follower again. Still, he reasoned, the boy had seen their faces and heard their names.

He could not be allowed to escape.
Quickly, before the child was out of range, he cast "Avada Kedavra!"

The disfigured man watched in satisfaction as his spell arced toward his victim.

Harry was barely 20 feet off the ground when the spell impacted into his armor, catching him fully in the back, just below the reactionless thruster.

It is a tribute to Starktech engineering that no part of the killing curse penetrated to the boy within the armor. The armor itself was not as lucky. The surge of magical energy overloaded the PowerTap systems, causing an electrical discharge that cascaded all over Harry's body, leaving severe electrical burns in its wake, as the onboard AI rattled out an electronic death scream. Some secondary systems survived and continued to carry out their last orders.

The Armor remained in flight mode, with its limbs frozen in flight attitude. The reactionless thruster continued its programmed burn for the suborbital return to Hogwarts. The helmet, already sealed against Voldemort's attack, remained gas tight, the internal oxygen systems online.

Had Harry been conscious he might well have altered his flight profile from the powered ballistic arc into something more survivable, but the pain of his injuries didn't wake him for another four minutes, after he had already reached the peak of his return trajectory and was heading down at an unsurvivable speed.

"Come on, come on, come on!" Harry screamed as the repurposed Quidditch stadium came into view far below him. He angled his body into the local vertical and started the armor's remaining systems to calculating if the suit had enough thrust to provide a suicide burn.

He had gone too high, far too fast, and had stupidly allowed himself to come down even faster. The onboard AI still would not reboot, and most of his secondary systems were glitching to the point that he had needed to shut down their monitoring alerts to allow him to see the HUD display showing his ill-conceived flight path, while hoping that the data they supplied was at least in some way accurate.

Assuming he survived this idiocy, Harry decided he would never question his father's devotion to safety protocols again.

The numbers scrolled across his HUD told a rather upsetting story. He did not have the delta velocity to keep from plowing into the ground, and he was passing 2000 meters above ground for altitude.

Inventory time:

His reactionless thruster would not allow him to land safely.

The pirated broom tech he had integrated into the armor could not overcome his vertical velocity in time.

In short there was nothing he could do to prevent himself from hitting the ground, and there was absolutely no doubt that the sudden stop would kill him very dead.

That morbid thought caused Harry to blink as he passed 1800 meters from the ground. Sudden stop. Maybe that was the answer. Do not suddenly stop.

Harry rotated his body so that his thruster was at an angle to local vertical, he then drove his broom
flight systems to give him all the horizontal motion they could manage. Between the two, he had taken on a definite drift from his ballistic path by the time he passed 900 meters above the ground.

At 100 meters from the ground, Harry was well beyond the bounds of the Quidditch stadium and moving almost horizontally, but still entirely too fast. Verifying that his emergency runic shield was active, and redirecting all remaining power to the suit's inertial dampeners, Harry had time for one final thought.

~ This is going to suck. ~

He was right.

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Albus Dumbledore was the first to reach the site of Harry's landing, but only because of his ability to apparate within the castle's wards.

His wand swishing along the surface of the magical construct, the Headmaster pushed with all of magical potential to discover just what this 'shield' might be. Analysis of the magical structure evaded even his wand… His wand.

He gathered his magic and pushed with everything he had.

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1,465 miles away in Budapest, a man clad in black ballistic body armor slowed his breathing so that it didn't interfere with his aim. The cybernetics in his left arm interfaced with the rifle's scope aligning for a guaranteed kill shot on his target. Satisfied, he moved to pull the trigger.

A sudden unfamiliar sensation prevented him from taking his shot. It was as if something was physically pulling on his very soul. The sensation only lasted a fraction of a second, but it sufficiently destroyed his concentration to the point where his left arm ceased normal function.

The man swore as he disassembled and packed away his weapon with only one functioning arm. He needed to have his arm checked out. His target would live another day.

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Albus was still investigating the very odd shield sphere that seemingly surrounded the boy on all sides suspending him in midair within the trench his impact had dug, when the huge black dog arrived at a full run.

"Is he…" Sirius asked upon completing his transformation back to human.

"I do not know," Dumbledore muttered as he continued trying to break through the shield. "I can't even tell if he's breathing, though he must be to maintain the shield. It is clear that something happened to him, as evidenced by the shredding of his uniform to expose that armor of his."

"How can he be maintaining this shield while unconscious?" Sirius demanded.

"Again," Dumbledore admitted, "I do not know. As frustrating as it is to admit, when it comes to Mr. Stark, there seems to be an ever-increasing number of magics that do not make sense."

"Well," Sirius said, rapping the surface of the shield sphere with his knuckle, "It's solid. I've only seen that in conjured metallic shields. Is this some sort of transparent metal?"
Steve Rogers slid to a stop beside Sirius. "Sorry I'm late," he said showing no evidence of exertion. "Your man Hagrid felt that this wasn't the place for a 'Muggle' and moved to stop me. He's a big fellow, so he should be up and around in a few minutes. Albus, remind me to apologize to him. What is the situation?"

"It seems that Mr. Stark is incased in some sort of shield bubble that I do not recognize," Albus explained running his hands over the surface of the sphere. "Is it too much to hope that this is the product of the elder Mr. Stark's technology and that you know how to counter it?"

"If Tony has this kind of force field, he hasn't mentioned it," Steve said, removing his own round shield from his back and raising it above his head in both hands. "In my experience, these things work by spreading any force used against them over their entire surface. Sometimes, you just need a bit of an edge..." with all his might, Rogers drove the edge of his shield into the sphere.

The Vibranium/Adamantium alloy penetrated three inches into the force shield before its momentum stopped. Rogers changed his grip on the embedded shield and grit his teeth. "These things usually fail when you put a bit of angular force on them."

The shield sphere disappeared with a loud pop once Rogers twisted his shield. Harry's armored body fell to the ground, laying still for a moment until the helmet's mask opened to reveal Harry's sweating face.

"Now you're just showing off," he gasped. "Ben beat on a smaller prototype for almost an hour and never got a reaction, you walk up and pop it."

"Are you all right, Trooper?" Rogers asked as he knelt at the boy's side.

"Oh, god no," Harry admitted. "I think I need the Hospital wing, but not until I get a bit more sun. My batteries are completely drained. Without power, I'm never getting out of this thing."

"He said he was Voldemort," Harry reported with a shrug. "Was he telling the truth? I dunno, but he certainly seemed to believe it."

Poppy Pomfrey huffed and cast the latest of her diagnostic spells on his body. Beyond some nasty electrical burns, and more bruising than a human being should ever have, Harry was frustratingly healthy after his adventure and this annoyed the nurse beyond all expectations.

"How could he possibly be back from death?" Sirius asked.

"Villains have an annoying tendency to find death to be little more than a momentary inconvenience," Steve Rogers said from where he leaned against the wall with his arms folded across his chest. "So, what is the plan, Albus?"

"Are you sure you defeated him, Mr. Stark?" Dumbledore pressed.

Again, the boy shrugged. "His body went 'poof' when I finited the spells holding him together, but he's evidently been without a body before, so did I defeat him or simply inconvenience him? We won't know until he manages to come back... or doesn't."

The old man nodded, "I fear you are correct, Mr. Stark. I suppose there is nothing to do but alert the Ministry."

"Like they'll be of any help," Sirius scoffed.
"True, but it must be done," Dumbledore agreed. "Will Mr. Stark be able to attend the Leaving Feast, Poppy?"

"Yes," the nurse said begrudgingly. "His burns should be healed in fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes?" Rogers asked perking up. Over his career, burns were the injuries he had needed to deal with most often. "Would it be possible to get some of that salve?"

"Are you sure, you're all right?" Padma whispered. Harry turned his attention away from whatever nonsense the Headmaster was blathering on about concerning the visiting schools and unity of the magical world. Underneath the table, he took his girlfriend's hand and squeezed. "I'm fine. Pomfrey fixed me right up."

"Hanging out with you isn't good for my heart," Padma sighed. "When you disappeared, I thought it had stopped."

"As kidnappings go, it was fairly boring," Harry confided. "The only odd thing wanted was my blood and not money or influence over my father. He threatened me, we did a little dominance dance, and then I ran for it. The actual running away turned out to be more dangerous than the kidnapping."

"Your view of life is so very messed up," Hermione whispered. "Now, hush. The Headmaster is talking."

"The Headmaster is always talking," Harry pointed out. "Never actually doing anything, even when you tell him what is going to happen, and he assures you that his precautions will keep you out of it, but he'll talk about it."

"So cynical," Padma giggled, grasping his hand under the table.

"That's me, cynical to the end," Harry agreed. "I haven't been told if I'm riding the train back or not. I don't know if we'll have much time alone."

"We'll have to make time," she suggested.

"Sorry, mate," Sirius grinned. "I've got to get back to Greer and Jennifer."

"And I have an appointment with Bryan Braddock tomorrow, and Hauptmann Deutschland on Friday. Tony told me he'd arranged for a ride home for you, and that she would meet you at the train station," Steve explained.

"Are you starting a Confederation of Captains?" Harry snarked.

"Those of us who identify as representatives of our nations have been having meetings for about a decade," Steve said easily, refusing to acknowledge the jibe. "'Captain' is a title many of us share, but it is far from universal. T'challa is a member of the group for example. So is Peregrine from France. We maintain our contacts as a way of offering a unified stance against planetary threats."

"Now I feel bad about running home to my wife and kid," Sirius snarked. "You're riding the train, Harry. Enjoy the time with your friends."
Lockheed thrummed happily when he fluttered onto Kitty Pryde's shoulder, the pair both ignoring the looks of horror from the passing crowd on Platform 9 3/4.

"I missed you too, you vicious beast," the young woman said, gently stroking the miniature dragon's chin. "Did you behave for Harry?"

"He was a little jerk when you dumped him on me," Harry suggested, watching as Padma disappeared through the Floo access along with her mother and sister. "He was a little jerk all school year, and I return him to you still a little jerk."

"That's not nice, Harry," Kitty grinned.

"A little jerk, that I will someday change into something small and fluffy," Harry threatened. "The torture is waiting for it. You won't know where, you won't know when, but it will happen, and I will laugh."

"Hrmph!" the miniature dragon scoffed, a wisp of smoke issuing from his nostrils giving a clear impression that his response was something along the line of 'bring it on, mammal.'

"You're so mean," Kitty pouted.

"That's what I told him all year," Neville agreed helpfully. "Horribly mean to poor little Lockheed."

"Oh, you did not," Harry laughed. "Quit trying to suck up to the pretty girl or I'll take that poster back."

"And now you're being mean to Neville," Kitty teased with an evil glint in her eye. "So, you think I'm pretty do you, Harry?"

"Oh, god!" Harry said looking to the sky for aid that never seemed to come.

"That's just Harry," Hermione interjected helpfully. "Where do you sell your posters anyway? I'd love to add one to my collection."

"Didn't you say the poster was 'fairly graphic' Hermione?" Harry snarked. "I seem to remember you thought it was fairly graphic."

"Only in comparison with the social norms of Magical Britain," Hermione protested.

"I like you," Kitty laughed. "You never cut Harry any slack, do you?"

"Kurt is her favorite," Harry pointed out. "She said so when she was being all cattie about your poster."

"Kurt is my favorite, too," Kitty noted. "Though I do really like that charity poster Brian did."

"Oh, yeah," Hermione agreed.

"So, are you just here to pick up the little jerk, or are you my ride home?"

"Storm and her team are here for a conference on Muir Island," Kitty explained, guiding Harry toward the nearest wall. "I'm catching a ride home with them to visit my mom, and you're coming with us."
"On the Blackbird?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Yep," Kitty nodded.


"Bye, Harry," Hermione called.

"Blackbird?" Neville whispered to Hermione while maintaining a laser like focus on Kitty's bum as she and Harry passed through the wall.

"It's a kind of aircraft," Hermione explained. "The hero fan magazines aren't clear on what kind of plane it really is, and all the photos of it have been rubbish, but if it impresses Harry, it must really be special."

"Life threatening you mean," Neville laughed as he turned toward the Floo portals. "Those are the kind of things Harry likes."

"True enough," Hermione agreed. "See you in September, Neville."

Padma entered her father's office only to discover a Patil/Stark Magitech computer waiting for her at her desk in her father's office.

"It's nothing to be frightened of," a new voice interrupted the silence.

Padma turned to find a young man of perhaps 17 sitting at another computer.

"You must be Padma," he said, rising to his feet and offering his hand. "I'm Ankit Malhotra."

"Father said he had hired someone for the office," Padma said taking his hand. "Welcome to the company."

"Thank you," Ankit said with an easy smile. "You attend Hogwarts, yes?"

"I do," she said with her own smile. "And you?"

"Oh, I'm a squib," he laughed. "An embarrassment to the family. My father was telling yours of his embarrassment and how he was casting me out now that I've finished my secondary education among the Muggles. Your father told my father he was a fool and hired me on the spot. I'm attending University in the coming secession and will be studying business."

"You're seemingly taking that quite well," Padma noted.

"You either laugh, or you cry," Ankit explained. "Laughing is much more fun. Plus, the experience has given me a goal in life, to prove my father wrong, so I've got that going for me. When you're ready, I'll step you through the ordering process in your computer, once you've got that, we can go through the invoicing process."

"Sounds good," she nodded.

"Your mother is still doing the actual bookkeeping by hand, insisting that the way she has always done it is still the best way," Ankit confided. "I'm certain I can convince her otherwise by the end of the summer."
"Changing my mother's mind?" Padma scoffed. "Good luck."

Pepper pulled Harry into a hug. "You're gone for 10 months and all I get is four lousy emails?"

"Sorry," Harry shrugged from inside the hug, "This year was crazy."

"Every year at that place has been crazy," she laughed finally releasing him. "Are you going to have time for me this summer?"

"I've got no plans at all," Harry said. "I'm supposed to see Franklin tomorrow, but you'll be working then. Dinner Friday night? I'll make Mac and Cheese."

"I'm going to hold you to that Mister."

"Are you sure about this?" Harry asked. The rooftop vantage-point the pair had selected allowed a clear view of the building they were keeping under surveillance.

Franklin shrugged. "I was with Mom and Dad when they ended up responding to an alert. We buzzed that building on our way. We were going awfully fast, but I'm sure I saw people in AIM uniforms on the fifth floor. Whatever is going on, the building looks to be abandoned and it turned out that it's psi shielded to heck and back."

"Those AIM clowns are anything but subtle," Harry nodded, remembering the absurd yellow bee keeper outfits worn by the scientist shock troops of Advanced Idea Mechanics. He activated his armor's link to StarkTech and subvocalized some search commands. "The building belongs to... Oh my god."

"What?" Franklin asked wishing that Harry's armor had external displays.

"The building is owned by Four Freedoms Enterprises, dude. It belongs to your family," Harry looked up at his friend. "There goes that pesky 'breaking and entry' concern."

"That's ballsy," Franklin noted. "Taking over a building owned by heroes. Well, as a minor stockholder in Four Freedoms Enterprises, I think it's time to do an inspection of the property. And who better to do that inspection than Psion and Technomage?"

"Technomage and Psion," Harry corrected. "I get top billing or I tell Hermione you're doing this stuff."

"You wouldn't dare."

The helmet of Harry's blue and bronze armor extended from the collar to cover his head and face as it powered up. "Try me, Psion," his electronically distorted voice said. "Do you think I've forgotten about the doll you got Parvati to send you? I get top billing until we come up with a team name."

"You won't be able to hold her over me forever," Franklin groused as he caused the air in front of his face to twist and warp, distorting his features. "Besides, you gave Hermione a doll of me."

"No, not forever," Technomage admitted. "Just until Hermione gets tired of you and dumps your lovesick butt, or you marry her. Besides, I didn't give Hermione a doll, I gave her a limited-edition
action figure." A smile ghosted across his features, hidden by his helmet. "An action figure she tells me is anatomically correct."

"You suck and should die," Psion suggested helpfully. "Ready?"

"Yeah," the armored wizard nodded. "I'll need a lift."

"What, that erector set of yours doesn't fly?" Psion asked as he wrapped his friend in a bubble of telekinetic force and floated them both to the roof of the building they were about to 'inspect'.

"I found out the hard way in June that my control of the flight systems needs a whole lot of work, and my landings are anything but covert." Once his feet settled onto the rooftop, Technomage was surprised when an alert appeared on his Heads-Up Display.

~Ah, crap, ~ he thought.

~What is it? ~ Psion asked via his telepathy.

"My dad is calling me. Just a sec," Harry triggered one of his armor's silencing charms, and then willed the armor to answer the phone. "Hey Dad, what's up?"

"I just saw that your armor powered up and sealed itself," his father said quietly in his ears. "You just queried StarkTech for information about a building owned by the Fantastic Four, and of course you're with Franklin. Should I ask what you're up to?"

"Just goofing off Dad, testing stuff."

"Uh huh," Tony agreed sarcastically. "Your flight system are powered, but offline."

"Dad, if I didn't know better, I would think you didn't trust me," Harry said in a hurt tone. "Sticking white rat monitors on my armor like that."

"You do know better, and I don't trust you," his father said easily. "What are the pair of you up to?"

"We're practicing infiltration into a derelict warehouse," Harry sighed guiltily.

There was a short pause on his father's side.

"Harry, don't do anything stupid."

"Dad!"

"Fine," Tony sighed, "You and I will go over your armor tonight when you get home. I'm still not satisfied with its performance during that stupid tournament, and I'll want to see what the system logs say about your testing this afternoon."

Relief washed over Harry, "that's no problem, Dad."

"Ok," his father said. "Have fun."

As soon as the line went dead Technomage turned to Psion, "Okay, I managed to convince him that nothing is going on."

~ Our folks are smart people, ~ Franklin silently sniggered, ~ but sometimes, they can be so clueless. ~

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Reed Richard's face came into focus on the screen. "Is this important Tony?" he asked, "I have several experiments going on just now."

"You've always got several experiments going on, Reed," Tony laughed. "But right now, our boys are out doing something stupid."

"How stupid?" Richards asked, suddenly concerned.

"I don't think they've managed to be stupid to the level we usually manage, but still pretty damned dumb," Tony explained. "Harry is out in his new armor, and Franklin is with him. Harry just queried the Stark Tech servers about a property you own, and then his armor went hot and sealed itself on his command. I called him to find out what was going on and he gave me some song and dance about practicing covert infiltrations with their equipment and abilities."

Richards scanned the data packet Stark had forwarded him, before making some entries in his own computer. "That property is currently unoccupied and is supposed to be for sale, but nothing has happened on that front for over a year. That's odd."

The screens changed to a first-person view of a long dark hallway. "This is a live feed off Harry's armor; I'm pretty sure he doesn't know about it. We'll be able to see what they're up to. You'd best grab Sue, she'll skin you alive if you don't."

"Understood," Reed acknowledged. "Transferring this feed to the main screen in our family room."

"We own the property?" Ben Grimm rumbled from his place on the sofa, a large bowl of popcorn on his lap.

"We do," Susan confirmed, reaching over to steal a handful of the corn. "Our corporate records show that it's supposedly up for sale, but a quick look at the realtor's database didn't show it as being listed at all."

"I found signs of a hack on the database from around seven months ago," Reed added while he fussed with the monitor, attempting to 'improve the picture'.

"Leave the damned display alone, Reed," Susan laughed. "If I'm going to be punishing Franklin, I'm going to want to know what I'm punishing him for."

"You're too hard on the kid, Sue," Johnny Storm halfheartedly protested. "You were the same way with me, and in spite of that, look how I turned out."

"If that's supposed to make me feel better, it isn't working," Susan sniffed.

"All right," Tony said from the communicator window in the lower left corner of the monitor. "Whatever they're up to, Harry's sensor suite is picking up movement ahead of them. I'm starting the audio feed."

"Do they know we're watching?" Johnny asked.

"No," Susan said, shaking her head. "Hush now."

"Four human sized heat sources around the next corner," Harry whispered inside his armor, he knew
it was utter unnecessary to actually vocalize his side of the conversation, but he always found it easier to actually speak his side of a telepathic exchange.

~ Yeah, ~ Franklin's words 'sounded' in his mind. ~ Got them. ~

Harry glanced up toward the small mirror Psion was levitating in the corner of the hallway and the ceiling. The though occurred that a tech, or perhaps, magical tech, version of his friend's trick might be useful.

~ Quit plotting to steal my tricks, ~ Psion mentally hissed. ~ You've already got more than enough advantages. ~

"Quit coming up with usable ideas, there is no such thing as too many advantages. If I could figure out how to duplicate Spiderman's webbing I'd do that too," Harry responded as he enclosed the four AIM troopers inside a bubble of silence. "Ok, they can't call for help, how do you want to do this?"

The four collapsed in a heap. ~I just shut off their voluntary muscle control, ~ Psion noted. ~Running a check… They're just guards, but they don't know what they're guarding. ~

"Well," Harry said quietly, "I suppose that means we should find out."

The pair moved forward, together.

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"Well, that's just revolting" Grim rumbled.

"What?" Johnny asked.

"All that time I put into makin' sure those two can defend themselves and they're just strolling in, shuttin' down the baddies by remote control," Ben complained as the screen showed another group of AIM Scientist Troopers in their Beekeeper outfits collapse. "In my day…"

"Yeah, yeah," Johnny mocked. "In your day, you'd stroll over to the next cave and give Ogg a piece of your mind."

"Matchstick," Ben rumbled, "If this wasn't a better show, I'd show you a cave or two."

"I wish we could hear Franklin's side of the conversation," Susan sighed.

"Sadly," Tony said from his picture in a picture window, "I've never managed to figure out a telepathy voder."

"You probably won't," Reed interjected, "every telepath is on, for lack of a better word, a different frequency. You might be able to calibrate one to a specific telepath, but a broad spectrum voder… Not going to happen." His brow furrowed. "What was that? Tony can you roll the playback about six seconds?"

"What did you see?" Tony asked as he rolled back the video feed and enhanced it on his end.

"I'm not sure, it looked like…" Reed leaned forward, his eyes going very wide. "That's MODO tech."

"Oh, shit," Tony agreed. His words echoing in an empty room where the Fantastic Four no longer were.
"This is very weird," Technomage said as he took up position to the right of the final door.

~ Extremely weird, ~ Psion agreed from the left side. ~ Seven groups of guards, no management, no researchers, not even any computers. ~

"Well," Technomage said, "According to the blueprints on file, this is the last room on this floor. My armor has taken control of the door, I can open it when we're ready."

~ I have no idea what's waiting for us in there, ~ Psion admitted, ~ the psi shielding is tough. I can break it, but that would be like putting up a Neon sign saying Break-In in Progress. ~

"The Psi Shields are focused on this room?" Technomage asked. "That's not ominous at all."

~ Yeah, ~ Psion nodded. ~ I was thinking a strategic retreat and making a call for my folks might be a good idea. ~

Technomage nodded in agreement when the door slid open.

"I've been expecting you," a voice from inside the room said. "You might as well come in and get it over with."

Psion exchanged a look with Technomage, who shrugged in return. The two teens steeled themselves and looked into the room.

The Invisible Woman was the first one through the door, her force field formed into invisible razor-sharp blades that shredded everything in her way. The rest of the Fantastic Four trailed behind her, each of them more than a little concerned about getting between Susan and the villain.

"MODOK!" she thundered, "GET AWAY FROM MY SON!"

"Mom!" Franklin shouted, putting himself between his rampaging mother and the other two people in the room. "Calm down, he's not MODOK."

"What?" she gasped, her invisible blades ceasing to exist.

"Technically," the figure sitting in a wheelchair interjected, "I am MODOK. I am MODOK Prime's clone 19900827-A. My personal designation is MODOD."

"MODOD?" the Torch asked.

"Mental Organism Designed Only for Dying," the young man responded in a matter of fact tone. "MODOK Prime had concerns about his mortality, so I was created to answer those concerns."

"We are not calling you MODOD," the unmasked Technomage said. "You aren't going to die."

"You are incorrect, Harry," the young man said. "My death is programmed into my genes. Unless accident or malfeasance intervenes, I will expire on the 5th anniversary of my becoming aware. That will come in sixty-three days."

The air filled with the hum of a pair of Starktech reactionless thrusters. The Ironman rocketed into the room with the repulsor emitters on his gauntlets glowing. Upon seeing everyone conspicuously not fighting anyone, he lowered his outstretched arms and landed.
"So," the Armored hero said, "what did I miss?"

"Programmed to die?" Pepper asked as she sipped at her glass of wine. "Why would anyone program a 15-year-old to die?"

"He's actually 5 or so," Harry explained from the kitchen, "accelerated invitro development, followed by some kind of forced maturity in a techno-organic pseudo womb, where he was educated until the physical age of 10 or so, then 5 years of real time life with the ability to describe his descent into entropy."

Harry came to the table with a plate in each hand. "It sounds horrible, but it led to... well, MODOD. We really need to come up with a better name for him."

"Yes you do," Pepper agreed. "And he was hidden in a building owned by the Fantastic Four?"

"Yeah, Franklin spotted the guards in their stupid bee keeper outfits while out with his folks, so we decided to do an assault on the building," Harry explained, taking his seat at the table and picking up his fork to start on his salad. "We made our way, putting the guards to sleep through magic or psionics, and found the hidden lab. We were kind of worried when we found the defenses on the last room and were getting ready to call for the FF, when the door open and MODOD invited us in. He thought we were there to kill him because MODOK was tired of waiting, and just wanted to get it over with. We kind of made friends before Frank's family busted in."

"You did call them?" Pepper asked.

"No, Dad has a white rat monitor on my armor. I don't think he trusts me."

"I wonder why that might be?" she asked.

"Yeah, Franklin spotted the guards in their stupid bee keeper outfits while out with his folks, so we decided to do an assault on the building," Harry explained, taking his seat at the table and picking up his fork to start on his salad. "We made our way, putting the guards to sleep through magic or psionics, and found the hidden lab. We were kind of worried when we found the defenses on the last room and were getting ready to call for the FF, when the door open and MODOD invited us in. He thought we were there to kill him because MODOK was tired of waiting, and just wanted to get it over with. We kind of made friends before Frank's family busted in."

"You did call them?" Pepper asked.

"No, Dad has a white rat monitor on my armor. I don't think he trusts me."

"I wonder why that might be?" she asked.

Fury looked up from the report. "You're sure about this?"

"Yes," the electronic voice responded in time with the agent's keystrokes. "Not an alien threat. Home grown terrorist. The Kree attack last year was a strike at Stark the younger, not at Earth."

"And the Zombie wizard?" Fury pressed.

"Why do I bother typing the reports?" the agent asked through his voder. "No one reads them, they just hold them while asking me questions. Stark the younger's blood was used in the ritual that returned the wizard to full life. Before I could reverse that process, Riddle's followers were on site and he challenged the boy to a duel."

"How did you get the site so quickly?" the Head of S H I E L D asked.

"You've read my jacket," the agent snorted. "Why do you ask questions you know the answers to? I was valuable to S W O R D because of my tracking abilities. I was valuable to you for the same reasons. I had the kid tagged, when he disappeared, I followed. The wizard was reborn in a ritual, called his troops and then dueled the boy. Their wands formed some kind of quantum linkage, and started to manifest an odd, and judging from the reaction of Riddle and his crew, unexpected isolation of the two casters. The kid's experimentation with Vibranium allowed him to win, and his Stark Armor allowed him to survive the counter attack by the Wizard's followers, though it was close."
"So, Riddle is dead?"

"Sure, why not?" the Agent asked with a shrug. "He's been dead before, he'll probably be back.

Fury nodded, pausing to digest what he had been told. He had, in fact read the report, but he had been in the field too long to ever believe that the reports held all the information. "Do you think you'll be able to return to keep an eye on the boy next year?"

"Unlikely," Lockheed the Dragon offered a reptilian grin as his fingers danced across the keyboard of his voder. His mouth and voice box really weren't suited to voicing human speech, at least not beyond the amusement of annoying the Stark kid. "Unless you can arrange for Kitty and Excalibur to have to leave the system again and need a baby sitter."

"This is my favorite place for lunch," Padma explained, leading Ankit to the bench in the park. "Far enough from the playpark that it's quiet, but close enough to the office that getting back doesn't take any time at all.

"Very nice," Ankit agreed. "I've been eating at my desk since I was hired. A change of scenery might be just what I need."

"I mentioned taking you out to lunch, so mother went a little crazy with packing our meal," she laughed. "I hope you're hungry."

"No worries," Ankit nodded accepting the offered covered plate. "I've always been hungry since I was about 12 years old."

Padma found herself blushing for some reason she could not identify. "Good."

"I do not think I was monitored to this extent even in the earliest stages of my life under MODOK Prime's analysis."

"Don't worry about it," Franklin said with a grin.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Franklin's dad can fix you, and mine can make him whatever he needs."

"Your optimism is encouraging," MODOD responded from the hospital bed where he was connected to multiple machines. "However, realism requires I rely on actual data rather than optimism. While my creator is admittedly less prodigiously productive than your own, in the biological sciences, he is nearly unsurpassed. I was created with an intentionally limited lifespan, so that my descent into entropy could be measured and analyzed."

"Not going to happen," Franklin said, "Now, we need to get you a name."

"I am designated MODOD," MODOD protested.

"That's not a name," Harry pointed out, "it's a pessimistic descriptor."

"Franklin?" a girl's voice broke in as she opened the door. "Are you in here?"

"Hey Cassie," Franklin said, "what's up?"

"Hiding from my Mom," the blonde girl answered. "Hey Harry." She looked expectantly between...
"Ah, Cassie, this is…" Harry paused, "we don't know what his name is yet."

"I am designated MODOD," MODOD insisted.

"And we're not calling you that," Franklin insisted.

"MODOD?" Cassie asked.

"Mental Organism Designed Only for Dying," MODOD answered helpfully.

"Oh, yeah," Cassie agreed, "we're not calling you that. I'm Cassie Lang."

MODOD nodded as much as he could, restrained as he was by the medical sensors. "I am pleased to meet you, Cassie Lang. You are female, correct?"

It was only due to her exposure to the insane weirdness of the world her father had exposed her to that Cassie did not react to the question with anger or sarcasm. "Yes, I am."

"Like Susan Richards," MODOD nodded. "My records show that AIM Head of Biological Sciences, Agnes Kaknis volunteered to serve as my gestation host. Agent Kaknis is female as well."

"Our buddy here has lived something of an isolated life," Harry explained.

"No, really?" Cassie asked, her sarcasm finally finding a release. She lowered herself on to one of the chairs. "So, you need a name."

"Franklin and Harry insist that I do," MODOD agreed. "I am not sure that I see the necessity."

"The necessity is, that while you may have been designed to die, there is more to you than that," Franklin explained. "Dad is going to make sure you have a full life, so you need a name, not a descriptor."

"If we were called what we are, rather than who we are, Franklin would be called 'Homo Superior, God Trainee'," Harry explained. "And I would be 'Homo Magus, God's gift to women'."

"Oh, lord," Cassie sighed. "And I would be 'Homo Sapiens, about to slap a couple of idiots'. You need a name because people have names. How about 'George'?"

The three boys in the room blinked. "George?" Harry asked, "why George?"

"Why not?" she asked. "It's based off my Dad's favorite comedian, George Carlin, and he's going to need a sense of humor if he's going to put up with you two idiots."

MODOD contemplated for a moment. "George is acceptable."

"George it is, then," Franklin said happily. "And now, we'll teach you about how cruel women can be."

Hermione Granger carefully folded the printout of her email before storing it away in what she had taken to calling her Memory book.

Franklin had told her many stories of his adventures since they had met, but this one… This one was
horrible, and she dearly hoped it was an exaggeration, while knowing it likely wasn't.

Being created to die, just to satisfy the curiosity of a sociopath. That was just too horrifying to contemplate, but it appeared to be what had happened to Franklin and Harry's new friend George. According to Franklin, George fully believed that he was going to die, while Franklin and Harry were convinced that Professor Richards would be able to save him.

'Dad can do anything,' was Franklin's explanation.

The young witch found herself hoping Franklin was right. If Professor Richards could not save the young clone, Franklin's world would be shaken to its foundations.

She reached for her phone. Perhaps Padma had heard from Harry and could offer his point of view on poor George.

The phone rang five times before it went to Voice Mail. That was odd, Padma always answered her phone.

"Good Afternoon, Padma, it's Hermione. I've just gotten some disturbing news from Franklin, and was hoping you had heard from Harry. Call me."

"Boys," Reed Richards said solemnly. "We need to discuss George's prognosis."

Franklin and Harry exchanged a quick look, before turning to face Mr Fantastic.

"You've figured out what to do," Franklin grinned.

"Knew you would," Harry agreed.

"Boys, I've already spoken with George, and I am only speaking with you because he told me I should. I can't cure him."

"What?" Harry asked.

"That's not funny, Dad," Franklin said with a frown. "You shouldn't joke like that."

"I'm not joking, boys," Richards sighed. "Over the last two months, I've tried everything. I've even brought in people with healing abilities. None of us can do anything. What is killing George is too much a part of him. It can't be removed. I've tried Gene replacement, I've tried nano constructs, and transfusions from people with healing factors. None of it made the slightest bit of difference. If I manage to inhibit the active suicide gene, that triggers a completely different gene in the same sequence to suicide. Cloning transfers the cellular time limit to the new form. I can't even transplant his brain into another body because the cells of his brain are on the same terminal timeline as the rest of his body. The only possibility of keeping George alive would be to transfer his mind to an electronic vessel, which would be a kind of hell. I'm sorry, but there is nothing I can do."

"But you're still trying, right?" Harry asked.

"Of course, I am, but you both need to be aware of the limits of what I can do. Be with your friend and don't treat him any different than you have been. George has accepted what is coming, in fact he has never doubted how and when his life would end. He needs his friends."

"If you're still trying," Franklin said with conviction, "then it's just a matter of time, Dad. You've
always come through in the pinch. You'll do it. You'll fix him."

As Franklin entered the room where George was living, Cassie Lang rushed out, running fulling into Harry, before wrapping her arms around him and starting to cry.

Franklin gave him a questioning look, ~ Not it, ~ he thought before carrying on into the room and closing the door behind him.

"Cassie?" Harry asked.

"He's dying," she gasped. "He's dying and no one can do anything about it."

"Frank's dad is working on it," Harry explained. "He wouldn't be Reed Richards if he didn't string his solution out to the very last second."

"I was in the room when Professor Richards told George there was nothing he could do, Harry," Cassie protested. "I was holding George's hand when Professor Richards told him. Why would he lie?"

"He wouldn't," Harry said confidently. "But he's still working on the cure, Cassie. I mean, come on, he's Reed Richards."

"Professor Richards is a genius, but he's still human," the girl protested. "I think you and Franklin are setting George up for a massive disappointment with your endless optimism."

"You worry too much," Harry laughed, guiding the girl down the hall. "Come on, you need to wash your face."

In the back of the darkened cinema, Padma pulled away from Ankit, fighting to regain her breath. On some level she realized that she hadn't been paying the slightest attention to the movie.

She moved closer to him again, her lips seeking his in the darkness. This hadn't come fast. It started with work, then lunches together away from the office, then Ankit had invited her to dinner, then dancing, then a series of movies, they had yet to become truly intimate, but it was coming, and she welcomed it.

Yesterday had been Harry's birthday, but she had been out with Ankit, spending the day in Blackpool, and hadn't spared Harry a thought.

When she realized that this morning, she had felt incredibly guilty, but had put the guilt out of her mind to get ready for work, and for seeing Ankit.

Ankit didn't have magic. On some level, she thought that his status as a squib should bother her, but it didn't. All she knew was that she wanted to be with him. School started in less than a month, and returning to Hogwarts was going to be hell.

"Where are we going?" George asked, as Harry held the door open for Franklin to push the wheelchair through.

"We're breaking you out," Harry suggested.
"You've spent your life in labs and hospitals," Franklin agreed. "If this is really your last day, and I don't believe that for a minute, you're going to see the world."

"There is no way our dads aren't going to fix you," Harry agreed.

"As I have told you both repeatedly, the deactivation features are integrated into my genetic structure. As impressively intelligent as your fathers are, I cannot be 'fixed'. Are you planning on using this construct to show me the world?" George asked as he eyed the original Fantasticar critically.

"She's old, but she flies like a dream," Harry assured his friend as he maneuvered the wheelchair into the center seat position and locked it into place before taking his own seat.

"We're heading to the Stark Estate," Franklin explained. "When Dad has his breakthrough, he can get hold of me, but for right now, we're heading to the woods for a picnic."

"Why?" George asked.

"Why not?" Harry asked in return. "You've been in Frank's Dad's lab for two months. Some fresh air and sunshine might be just what the doctor ordered."

"It is exceedingly unlikely," George said as the Fantasticar lifted vertically from its dock and began a flight with Franklin at the controls. "That mere air, no matter how 'fresh' will make any difference in my termination."

"Ever the optimist, Dude," Franklin snarked.

"The world," George said, gazing down at the city below them, "is so large. I always knew it was, but to actually see it..."

"Well, rubberneck all you want," Harry said. "It's 20 minutes to our hideout."

Edwin Jarvis entered the kitchen to find his employer and friend waiting for him.

"The kids having a picnic, Javis?" Tony asked.

"They are, sir," the butler admitted. "It is George's last day, after all."

"Harry and Franklin still believe that Reed and I are going to pull a miracle out of our asses at the last minute," Tony sighed, pulling a beer from the refrigerator. "Want one?"

"Normally, I would say no," Jarvis admitted. "However..."

"A nice kid dying in front of you cuts into the niceties of life," Tony said handing his old friend a bottle. "Did the boys sneak any?"

"No, at least not from here. I cannot speak for what they might have liberated from the Fantastic Four's kitchens. Mrs. Richards sent over a basket of her fried chicken for the boys."

"Did you steal any for us?" Tony asked hopefully.

"Indeed, sir," Jarvis said as he slid a plate in front of his employer.

Stark looked down at the plate with a smile. "Whatever I pay you, it isn't enough, Jarvis." The man's smile faded as he continued, "I do wish we could have kept up the 'dad can do anything' fiction a bit
Jarvis took his own seat at the table with his own place of fried chicken. "It will take a few days, but ultimately, Harry will come to terms with the idea that his father can only do almost anything."

"So many plants," George noted in awe.

"Summer is the best," Franklin agreed, sitting on the ground to the right of George's wheelchair.

"There's a lake over that way," Harry said, pointing to the southeast. "Normally we'd go swimming, but that probably wouldn't work for you."

"It would not," George agreed. "In my current state, I am almost certainly not buoyant enough to float in fresh water."

"Cool," Franklin interrupted, looking up from the goodie basket prepared by Jarvis. "Mom's fried chicken!"

"Score!" Harry exclaimed happily before realization kicked in. "Crap, that means they know what we're up to."

"Your parents are all quite observant," George agreed. "What is 'fried chicken like?"

"Find out for yourself," Franklin laughed handing his friend a chicken leg.

George examined the leg curiously. "This is not a food stuff I am conditioned to."

"So, if Frank and I are right, once Professor Richards cures you, you've potentially got a bellyache," Harry shrugged. "If you're right, it costs you nothing. Taste it. Mrs. Richards makes the best fried chicken on the planet. You can't go your whole life only eating that nutrient paste."

"The claim of best on the planet seems statistically unlikely," George said, hesitantly nibbling at the drumstick before his eyes widened. "To hell with statistics!" he breathed reverently, "This is wonderful!"

"Like Harry said," Franklin grinned. "The best on the planet."

"Reed?" Susan Richards called from the door to the lab. "The boys are gone."

"They left about an hour ago," Reed responded, pulling his optical enhancing goggles from his face. "Direct flight to the Stark Estate, landing in the meadow near their old fort. Did you get your care package to Jarvis?"

"Yes," the Invisible Woman nodded. "Ben is moaning because I didn't save him any of the chicken, but I thought the boys needed it more than he did."

"It's your own fault for being such a good cook," Reed mused. "Of course, when you consider what Ben and I would eat when we were in college, neither of us are really all that picky."

"That was some faint flattery," Susan laughed before becoming serious. "Any progress? One of your last minute eureka moments?"
"No," Reed admitted. "I can't save him. I would have to replace every single cell in his body, I can't even clone him because the clone would have the same suicide genes on the same clock."

"You've done your best," Susan assured her husband, wrapping him in a hug. "Franklin knows that."

"It's not that I can't help him that bothers me," Reed admitted. "It's that Franklin refuses to believe that I can't. Once that faith is lost, it will never come back."

"Franklin has more faith in you than that," Susan insisted, "and being unable to do the impossible will hardly make him doubt you. I had best make an appointment for Franklin to speak with Leonard Samson.

"You're right," Reed nodded. "I might talk to the doctor myself."

"Dad's cutting it close," Franklin said from where he laid in the clover, watching the clouds drift through the sky.

"He is not going to cure me, Frank," George wheezed softly. "I've been losing sensation in parts of my body for an hour. I can no longer move my left arm, and my right hand is unresponsive."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Harry demanded as he and Franklin sat up. "We'll get you back to the lab!"

"No," George shook his head. "I have known my entire existence that I was going to die today. But I thought it would be in a lab. I never dreamed it would be out here, in nature, with... friends. I cannot choose when I die, but I can choose where. Here. This place, after the perfect meal, is a good place to cease to be."

"Damn, dude," Franklin said reaching out to take his friend's right hand, while Harry took the left.

George smiled. "I cannot thank you two enough for this summer, I met girls, I ate real food, I had friends. The best 63 days of my life."

"How can you be so calm?" Harry wondered.

"None of this is a surprise," George whispered. "I came to awareness with the knowledge of the absolute limits on my lifespan. I have had my entire life to come to terms with my death. I do find the unknown of what is beyond life to be a bit concerning, but what will be will be. Please, I have only a few minutes left to me. Lay down and join me in watching the clouds form shapes that our minds will use primitive pattern recognition instincts to suggest recognizable objects in the sky."

Slowly, Harry and Franklin joined their friend in laying in the clover and staring at the sky.

"Look," George said, "a duckie."

"George," Harry gasped, his fight against tears starting to fail, "don't take this the wrong way, but you suck."

"I know," George agreed.

Four minutes later, Franklin suddenly realized he couldn't feel George's mind any longer. An hour after that, their fathers found the two young men still holding on to their friend.
MODOK armed his personal weapons suite as his last line of defenses crumbled before the onslaught of the creature.

"Well," Ben Grimm said as he slapped his massive hands together and allowed the last of MODOK’s defenders to fall to the floor. "That was fun."

"You've sealed your doom, you brain-dead cretin," MODOK sneered.

"Now, that's just hurtful," the orange rock man said. "People always forget that before I became the idol of millions, I went to Empire State University and earned three master's degrees in Aeronautical Engineering and after that, I was a Marine fighter jock. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not stupid."

"What do you want?" MODOK demanded.

"I used up a whole lot of favors I was owed to find you. It might interest you to know that Nick Fury knows where you are and what you're doing. Hell, he probably knows when you trim your toenails. I'm here to offer you a bit of advice and to issue a warning," Grimm rumbled. "Doin' you a favor really."

"A favor?" MODOK sneered. "Where are the rest of your pathetic team?"

"Susie is trying to console her son after your clone died," Grimm explained. "Reed and Johnny are keeping her calm enough to not come and kill you after how much your clone dyin' hurt Franklin."

"My… Clone?" the modified human asked, the expression on his gigantic face moving from one of confusion to one of understanding. "MODOD. You have MODOD! The clone was due to expire yesterday." His fingers danced across the keyboard. "His data upload did not happen. You must release the data."

"Tony Stark inhibited the data nodes you had implanted in the kid. Franklin and Harry Stark found him two months ago, and the three of them made friends. The boys wouldn't call him MODOD, and renamed him George. They went out of their way to show him that there is more to life than labs and research and pain. They snuck him out of Reed's lab on his last day, and that's where you made your biggest mistake."

"My biggest mistake?" the misshapen homunculus asked.

"You showed those two boys that their fathers couldn't fix everything," Grimm rumbled. "You showed them a reality they didn't need to know about just yet."

MODOK's response was nothing more than an incredulous look.

"So, here's what you're going to do," Grimm continued. "No more clones. You're going to stay away from Franklin and Harry. If you as much as come within a mile of either of them, you'll start running as fast as that stupid little hover chair can carry you. You're never going to get the data from George's death, and you're not going to try to get it."

"Or, what?" MODOK demanded. "Will the famous Fantastic 4 pay me a visit and send me to jail?"

"You wish," Grimm laughed. "Susie would kill you for what you did to her boy. And that would eat at her soul. Reed would lock you up in a prison with enough inhibiter tech to reduce you to a drooling idiot. Destroying your mind would eat at his soul."
The Orange Rock Giant took three steps forward and encountered MODOK's forcefield. With no real effort, he pushed through the field and continued forward. "Johnny would... Well, I don't know what Johnny would do, but it would probably be stupid and potentially fatal for you. That would probably ruin him for life."

MODOK's weapons fired at his command, bathing the Thing in a myriad of energies. Two massive orange hands reached out and crushed the emitters one by one until there were no more and Grimm continued on his way.

"You see, my family are all good people who go out of their way to do no harm," Grimm rumbled as he came nose to nose with the villain. "But me, deep down, I'm not a good person, I grew up on the streets, in a gang. Then, I was a Marine. I've killed people, MODOK, some at a distance, some close enough to touch. If you ever pull this sort of crap again, or even slightly annoy either of those kids, or any other member of my family, I will kill you. You made George to learn about death? Give me an excuse and I'll demonstrate it to you, slowly, up close and personal. To save my family, I will go back to what I've tried so hard to quit bein'. Build all the weapons and defenses you want, they won't make a bit of difference. The only reason I'm not doin' it now, is that Franklin and Harry would be disappointed in me. Do we understand each other, MODOK?"

The Thing maintained eye contact for several seconds, before nodding once and turning on his heel and leaving AIM's formerly best defended facility the way he had come.

MODOK watched him go, hoping that the wetness he felt in his chair was the result of coolant leaking from one of his destroyed weapons.

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"Two steps forward, one step back," Harry sighed. "On my good days anyway."

"That's a bit pessimistic for you, Harry," Leonard Samson noted.

"Yeah, I know," Harry agreed. "It's just George dying hit me harder than I expected. Both Dad and Professor Richards told us that it was a long shot that they could help. I mean, the problem was encoded in his genes. I knew that they probably wouldn't be able to help, Franklin knew it too, but I guess, despite everything, we didn't believe it."

"Hmm," Samson hummed.

"Our dads can do pretty much anything," Harry insisted.

"They can," Samson agreed, looking up from his notes. Harry was sitting on a straight back chair, elbows on his knees, his eyes focused on the floor between his feet. Leonard Samson had always eschewed the classic couch for his patient's sessions, but he had several quite comfortable chairs available in his office. Harry's selection of this particular chair over the one he usually used was telling. "Their abilities are part of the problem."

"I don't blame them," Harry protested.

"Nor should you," Samson nodded. "Reed did his best, and Tony made sure your friend was as comfortable as possible. They were not at fault for George's death, neither is Franklin, and neither are you."

"I know that," Harry admitted.

"You just don't believe it," the doctor concluded.
"I don't," Harry continued to fail to meet Leonard's eyes.

"Well, the good news is, you aren't depressed, at least not in a clinical sense, you aren't delusional, at least no more than any 15-year-old, and you aren't confused," Leonard leaned back in his chair, wishing he could still use his pipe. Sometimes the cravings would just come back out of nowhere. "What you are is sad, and more than a little bit angry. And that's okay."

"All of that from the 5 minutes I've been here?" Harry asked.

"All of that from the 8 years we've been speaking. I know you, Harry," Samson explained. "You aren't the frightened little boy from our first meetings. You aren't the goofball you were before you discovered Chaos magic, and happily, you aren't the driven Type A personality that materialized out of that incident. At least not very much, and not all the time. What you are now is a young man who wants to become a hero like his father."

"Do I?" Harry asked. "Do I really?"

Samson reached out and lifted Harry's chin so to establish eye contact. "Harry, speaking as someone who has, through little fault of my own, ended up in more than a few super powered fights, I can tell you this in utter certainty. All we can do is our best. And even when we do our best, in the face of the egomaniacal evil in this world, sometimes, people die. We can't prevent it, all we can do is try to limit it."

Samson sighed. "If you keep your goal of being a hero, like your father, it will happen again. I see a lot of the powered set in my practice, mostly from the Hero side, but some of the others come to me as well. They all find a way to deal with the reality of death in their lives, or they find other things to do that do not involve fighting."

"How did you deal with it?" Harry asked, hoping for some kind of guidance.

"I cut my hair," Sampson said with a smile, "got some suits, and re-opened my practice. Mostly I quit being a hero because I couldn't deal with it. If I'm out in the world and I see something I can help with, I do, I just don't go looking for fights anymore."

"I don't know if I can avoid it," Harry sighed, no longer looking at the floor. "I know it sounds paranoid, but there are people after me. They keep coming, keep escalating all the time."

"Harry," Samson said, leaning forward to put a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder. "That they keep coming just means they deserve what happens to them."

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Harry clung to his father for several seconds.

"I appreciate the affection, Harry, I really do, but is this the image you want to show the world at 15?"

"I just want to stay home and mope," Harry sighed as he released his father."

"As much as I would love to have you stay home, I know you, and I know you'll come to terms with what happened in time. It's never easy when you lose someone you care about. When I lost my parents, I thought I was going to stay in my room and cry forever, but Jarvis forced me to go back to school so that I would have more on my mind than just feeling sorry for myself."

"And I need to go back for the same reason," Harry nodded. "I know that, I just don't believe it."
Harry sighed and hefted his backpack, thankful for the shrinking charm that had miniaturized his trunk. "I'd best go before I change my mind."

Tony watched impassively as his son disappeared through the portal to the magical platform before sighing himself. Maybe a visit to one of the AIM facilities was called for. Work off a bit of his anger toward their leader, and with a little luck, find the bastard so he could explain in minute detail just how badly his plot had gone wrong.

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A/N: Yeah, a bit of a downer. Things will be better with 5th year. After all, the Ministry of Magic is about to take a deep interest in Harry and his education.

Chapter End Notes

I was in the final states of editing this chapter when I learned that the HP Fanfiction writer, Chilord, had died. For those not familiar with his work, Chilord was one of the better fanfiction writers, one who made the leap to professional writing, producing a wonderful book, "I'm Only a Freshman! (I'm Not a Super Spy! Book 1)" which sadly will never see its Sophomore version, which is a crime, because the world needs more of a field guide to the Ninjas of the United States.

In Chilord's memory, I invite you all to raise a glass in his honor, and maybe stroll over to Amazon and pick up a copy of his wonderful story.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!